

**JON J. DEEGAN'S**

**OLD GROWLER**

*Space Ship*

*No. 2213*

INTER X  
2213

1/6

**SCIENCE FICTION**

Fortnightly

No. 4

OLD GROWLER

JON J. DEEGAN

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more."

—B. C., Tredegar, S. Wales.

*Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.*



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*who*

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A young girl wrote and informed me that she had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

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**173, JOAN'S COTTAGE. LANIVET, BODMIN**

**No. 4**

**FEB. 1951**

# **SCIENCE FICTION FORTNIGHTLY**

**IN THIS ISSUE**

*A Full-Length Science Fiction Novel*

## **OLD GROWLER —SPACE SHIP No. 2213**

by

**JON J. DEEGAN**

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*All characters in this story are fictitious and imaginary and bear no relation to any living person.*

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**No. 5 ; March 1951**

Contains a long complete novel—

**SEVEN TO THE  
MOON**

by

**LEE STANTON**

*Author of "Mushroom Men from Mars"*

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## scientific doldrums

What do you want? That is the question raised by a number of letters to the editor.

As an example, quite a few readers have asked for short stories on science fiction subjects, and one or two letters have hinted at articles.

But do you want *Science Fiction Fortnightly* to become a magazine, or would you prefer the present system to continue of publishing one long complete novel, with a few pages devoted to editorial and letters to the editor? If you wish, we are prepared to change our style, but we feel that a majority do prefer a long work to a short one.

An intelligent reading public (and *Science Fiction Fortnightly* readers must, because of the very subject, have an above-the-average intelligence) will generally give time to an author to develop his subject, preferring that to a shorter

work frustrated by arbitrary questions of space. But . . . we are thoroughly democratic. You tell us what you think.

Another highly important point. When a science fiction writer gets into the mental doldrums he generally digs out a war between worlds. Probably most readers are as sick as we are of wars, and therefore will give encouragement to what might be described as more domestic science fiction, in which inter-planetary war does not intervene, such as Jon J. Deegan and Roy Sheldon excel in.

The scientific mind is interested in exploration, whether on a physical or mental plane. So, these stories which depend for their appeal upon the intrigue of far away places visited, seem to be more popular with our readers.

But . . . why don't you tell us what you think?

— EDITOR

# projectiles

## *Letters to the Editor . . .*

### COVERS

I have been reading Science Fiction (mainly imported) for the best part of a lifetime (I am 64), so perhaps you will not mind a few words of criticism (not all destructive).

Firstly, I greatly admire your courage in sticking to real science. So many other SF magazines indulge in utterly fantastic (and crudely thought-out) notions, that your books come as a breath of clean air (even though they are a good deal more solid!).

Secondly, I like the human touch that runs through your stories, contrasting nicely with the hard-bitten, cynical, soul-less humanity found in stories from a country that shall be nameless.

Thirdly, however, I must pick a bone with you. I don't like your covers (colourful as they are) because they smack too much of cheap fiction (and stuff like *Reconnoitre Krellig II* is not

cheap). You have adult stories — let's have adult covers. . . .

**B.D.K. (Cheltenham)**

*Reader B.D.K.'s letter goes on a lot more, but we ran out of brackets! Thanks, B.D.K. That's just the kind of letter we like — long and punchy. We are looking into the cover situation and several of your other suggestions are being considered. Keep us informed of your views, B.D.K.*



### NEW STAR

Having read *Reconnoitre Krellig II* and *Mushroom Men from Mars*, I can see a new Star has risen above the Science Fiction horizon. . . . I hope you can keep up the high standard.

**V.M. (Manchester)**

*We have every intention of doing just that. No story will get into SCIENCE FICTION FORTNIGHTLY that does not come up to par — or above it.*

more projectiles on page 126

## CHAPTER ONE

Three of us stood there in our atmosphere suits, appalled and breathless, bending over a patch of hot sand and studying the imprints thrown into harsh outline under Vega's pitiless glare.

Young Hartnell was first to straighten himself. "I just don't believe it!" he declared, flatly. "Must be freak markings made by some animal kicking pebbles——"

"Well," said Tubby Goss, "I've photographed the thing from about fourteen different angles. That's my part of the job done—I'm leaving the rest to you."

I looked at my watch. We were due to report again by radio in fourteen minutes. I wondered what the controller would say when I told him.

To appreciate our problem fully, it has to be remembered where we were and how we got there. Interplanetary Exploration Bureau, with its headquarters way back near Zeta Saggiarii, numbers us among its thousands of scientists and its hundreds of space-ships.

I'd like you to visit the place sometime. Everything is organised into an impressive and efficient monotony. Vast palaces of administration rear themselves skywards in five great divisions—Government, Science, Arts, Production and Records—with an annexe labelled Liaison. These are subdivided into huge, self-contained sections—Astronomy, for instance, comes naturally under Science—which in their turn are split again and again.

Purpose of Liaison, of course, is to cut a quick path through

all these inter-related compartments. Should Production wonder whether trouble might follow re-opening of old cobalt mines on Zenna IV, it yells for help to Liaison.

Inter-X is a sub-branch of Astronomy. After all possible observations of a particular planet have been taken by telescope, spectrograph and so forth, the likeliest subjects are earmarked for a visit. As soon as possible an Inter-X ship speeds its silent path across the void—often months or years on the way—taking specialised staffs who broadly explore the globe and return with records, photographs and specimens for headquarters' study. Afterwards it's up to the powers-that-be to decide whether more detailed prospecting should be undertaken.

The three of us who stood in silent wonder on Fellik, fourth planet of Vega, then, had a little earlier emerged from space ship No. 2213/3/8, unofficially and affectionately known to the crew as 'Old Growler' because of a peculiar noise from her gravity retractors. Hartnell—tall, lean and devil-may-care—is a physicist; Tubby—whose nickname suffices by way of description—is a photographer. I myself—known to most on board as 'Pop' because of maturer years—lay claim to some acquaintance with botany. We possess sufficient knowledge between us to be entrusted with sending preliminary reports to the ship, and because once before we made a fairly successful landing party on a planet known as Krellig II the job had been allocated to us again.

Headquarters were very enthusiastic about Fellik, for spectrographic analysis showed the atmosphere as actually breathable, although rather too rich in oxygen for comfort until after a year or so of gradual acclimatisation. Gravity was only slightly more powerful than that to which we were accustomed. Strong solar radiation might prove the biggest drawback to colonisation and for this reason we had been ordered to use atmosphere suits when leaving the ship.

But more than this—telescopic photographs showed certain patches of vegetation in what observers guaranteed were



definite geometrical patterns; therefore we expected to find life on Fellik. But what sort of life? Certainly not human! How, then, to explain the print of a bare foot which lay etched before us in the sand?

"No one could possibly have reached this place," persisted young Hartnell. "I tell you, Pop, it's absolutely fantastic!"

Tubby frowned. "Why should we necessarily be the first?"

"Have we seen any roads or tracks? Or any houses?"

"No-o-o," I admitted, slowly. We hadn't, either. Old Growler had circled the planet three times in braking orbits to check her speed before entering the atmosphere—the flying crews always detest this manoeuvre, preferring to take three weeks of gentle deceleration and fly straight to a landing—and we'd stared into visor screens till our eyes ached. Broad, roughly rectangular areas of supposed agriculture were easily visible, but there was no sign of the cultivators.

"Couldn't a runaway make the trip in an emergency lifeboat?" asked Tubby, his mind nagging away at the problem.

"Not a hope," said Hartnell.

I groaned. "I'm not prepared at my time of life to start chasing renegade space-crews through strange forests," I said. "It's too dangerous."

Tubby's theory was the only possible explanation. We of Inter-X represented homo sapiens in this corner of space, so far out that no other ship could legally have traversed the eight-month void. It constituted rather a blow to our pride, too. Inter-X possessed the job of pushing out man's frontiers of exploration and it galled us to think someone had arrived first, although the magnitude of that achievement compelled grudging admiration.

"No lifeboat could hold enough food for such a trip," declared Hartnell. "Anyway, Pop, tell the controller and see what he says."

I drew a deep breath. Somehow these two bright young specimens always saddled me with the job of reporting at regulation two-hour intervals. They said my wider experience

and command of language allowed me greater freedom of expression when arguing with controllers. This was nonsense of course. No one in his right senses talks out of turn with the boss. Truth to tell, I got the impression they were a little overawed by our crisp, cool, competent controllers, whom we never saw and who sat in their directional cabin high in the ship, often holding power of life or death over men carrying out their orders. At least, there is this to be said: I don't think anything else in the universe would prevent Hartnell and Tubby thumbing their noses if they felt like it.

I switched on the outside transmitting set built into my Mark VII suit, while the others listened over their inter-com apparatus.

"An outcrop of rock near purplish vegetation—probably a variety of gramineae," I explained. "At the side of the stone lies a patch of sandy soil about eighteen inches across. On the edge of this are markings similar to those left by a human foot."

"Describe these markings in detail," said the controller. It was obvious he hadn't turned a hair.

"Cool?" muttered Hartnell. "These lads are no hotter than liquid ammonia."

I did the best I could. "Apparently normal in every respect, except that there are marks of only four toes."

"Continue to listen," ordered the controller, impersonally.

There was silence for probably fifty seconds. Then he came on again. "No record of any wanted man with missing toe is contained in the police files. Exercise the greatest caution. You are authorised to use speed-gamma pistols if necessary against any humans encountered. Standard regulations apply concerning other forms of intelligent life. It is not proposed to send space-police search parties until further information is forthcoming. You will use your discretion concerning reports on emergency wave-length." He switched off.

"Grieving galaxies!" said Hartnell. He had a weakness for alliterative exclamations in time of stress. "Now they're

trying to turn us into a law-and-order squad! Look here, Pop, you know the book of rules—tell 'em we're scientists, not cops!"

Tubby laughed suddenly. "It doesn't seem to have struck 'em yet that somebody on the police books might have lost a toe after the records were entered."

"We do exactly as the controller says," I declared, firmly. "There's no arguing against that."

"Still," said Tubby. "he didn't actually tell us to chase the fellow. Personally, I think anybody who gets as far as this deserves to be left in peace."

"Provided he leaves us in peace," said Hartnell. "Keep the speed-gamma handy!"

I stared from end to end of that patch of strangely-coloured grain plants, feeling a cold shiver begin in the nape of my neck and gradually work its way down the spine. Tubby noticed my expression through the visor and started to ask a question.

"Cast your eye over these crops," I suggested. "Best part of a mile long and more than half-a-mile wide. Beyond those small hills we saw others, remember. Do you think only one man digs all that ground——?"

Hartnell's lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"There's no sign of tracks, either. How does anyone reach the plots to cultivate 'em? The regular rows of stalks make it certain to have been sown artificially." We pondered briefly and fruitlessly, until I went on, "It could only have been done one way—from the air."

"Insects!" said Hartnell, with a gasp of enthusiasm at his own ingenious theory. "Hovering insects! You know, we've never come across intelligent insects yet——"

"If we do, I hope I'm not among those present," said Tubby, uneasily. "What size of insect would want to grow vegetables four feet high?"

The more I thought about this the less I liked it. "Let's chop off a few pieces for specimens and be on our way. We

might stay here chattering till they come along and harvest us as well!"

I couldn't altogether agree with Hartnell's guess, although after years of space-wanderings I'm ready to keep an open mind about most things. Insects didn't explain that human footprint. And for reasons previously outlined I wasn't ready to admit the presence of *genus homo*.

You see, the origin of life is just as much a mystery to scientists today as it was eighteen hundred years ago. Even then they could keep a chicken's heart beating for years with artificial feeding and blood supplies. Given a piece of living animal or vegetable material, modern biologists can perform startling and gruesome experiments — but they still can't grow a tiny plant from sand and water. Colloidal chemists pretend they're nearing a solution, but I'll really believe they've succeeded when I peep through a microscope and see a moving blob of active jelly emerging from a test-tube full of sterile mud.

Countless suns sprinkle the heavens, many of them with their attendant planets. Planets in infinite variety—ranging between young globes hotter than molten molybdenum to old worlds of dead ashes covered with frozen methane. On pitifully few of them moves any living thing. Most promising boast a few lichens and fungi; some have higher vegetation; rarely does animal life exist and more rarely still do we meet intelligent beings.

But let's go back to that formation of life—a speck of protoplasm crawling from the ooze. Which way shall it develop? Something that eventually swims, no doubt—but what? Through unbelievable millions of years evolution continues and innumerable factors divert the creature's changing form. Imagine a tree, dividing endlessly into branches, some shooting sideways and coming to an end, others growing upwards into higher forms. Who shall say that on all planets the speck of protoplasm shall follow precisely the same path—to emerge as *homo sapiens*? No, only on Mother Earth is there Man.

Freak footprint or not, it was absolutely impossible for those pieces of land to have been cultivated by anything recognisable to us as a human being.

"Which way?" asked Hartnell.

"We'd better head straight out," I said. "At least we'll be able to collect a few more specimens and then they won't be able to accuse us of wasting time."

Glare from the great white sun now climbing into the heavens on our left would have proved unendurable save for the protective filters in our helmet-visors. All plants we saw possessed a purplish tint made positively violent by the blazing illumination and their leaves were tough as leather, giving an impression that with more moisture present near their roots they would have shot upwards into gigantic jungle growths.

Outside the cultivated patches were no trees or bushes worthy of the name. Behind us lay the hills, with the space ship on their far side; before us stretched a great, purplish plain shimmering with heat. External temperature was slightly in excess of 140 degrees, and I offered a silent message of thankfulness for the new Bergmann insulation in the Mark VII suits.

"If that was a human foot," said Tubby, reflectively, "and one without shoes, mind you, I wonder how he missed being scorched."

No sound of bird or insect life came through our microphones—only the harsh, leathery rustling of those pointed purple leaves, stirring amid hot breezes.

We had progressed about half-a-mile when it happened. Sudden, violent disturbance ran through the grain stalks in front of us, and as we froze in alarm, speed-gammas at the ready, there ran into our path some twenty yards ahead a small, black object that chattered and capered excitedly in apparently aimless circles. It resembled a man more closely than anything I'd ever seen, except pictures of monkeys which lived on Earth long ago. The creature had arms, legs

and torso covered with crisp, dark hair; its jaw jutted forward in prognathous fashion, the forehead lay back, low and brutish; its eyes rolled in some horrible ecstasy.

Tubby was first to relax when it became obvious we need fear no harm. With a disgusted gesture, he flung the specimen knife on the sun-baked ground and said, "I don't believe it!"

"Suffering Sirius!" exclaimed Hartnell, his eyes bulging.

And as we stared, the thing ceased its capering to stand upright on two legs, point a finger in our direction, throw back its head and squeal with derisive laughter!

## CHAPTER TWO

"At least," I said, "it's got a sense of humour—and I'm not at all sure I like it!"

"Don't be stuffy, Pop," said young Hartnell. "Suppose you'd never seen anybody wearing an atmosphere suit before. Wouldn't you laugh?"

Roaming a strange planet, never knowing what may jump out at you, isn't funny. I think Hartnell's facetious remark brought suddenly home to me in a new light the fact that we earned our living by a queer, perilous profession. We are apt to regard it merely as a dull job of work—a methodical collecting and tabulating of information which gradually accumulates with the remainder of the sum of human knowledge in Records' great vaults. Romance and adventure seem to lessen as the years roll by, until journeys through space become wearisome and landings on new worlds merely routine. Only now and again, when a fresher, younger mind clears cobwebs from the face of reality, do we realise with a start that we are helping in a great and genuine task of pioneering.

Of course, if I liked I could work as a classification botanist in one of headquarters' busy beehives, enjoying my leisure amid all the comforts of civilisation. And would I? Not on your life! I'd much sooner be cooped up with Hartnell and Tubby and the rest of the Inter-X squad in Old Growler, sharing a good grumble about what we often regard as headquarters' stupidity and lack of understanding. I mentioned

these reflections later to Hartnell, but he only grinned and said I was "a dry old stick."

Anyway, the animal in our path hugged both arms to his sides in continued spasms of mirth for fully three minutes, occasionally pointing a pink-tipped forefinger in our direction. I heard Tubby's cameras whirring softly and thought of the great shaking of heads and wagging of grey beards the pictures would cause when screened at headquarters.

"How about trying the book on him?" asked Hartnell. "It might work if he talks at all."

On the rare occasions that intelligent life is encountered during our wanderings, methods of communication prove a great stumbling block. Some beings—such as the giant centipedes on Athos and the tortoise-men on Krellig—emit sounds far beyond range of human ears; a variety of monster jellyfish beyond Alpha Centauri send messages by waving strange patterns with tentacles. Incidentally, only once have Inter-X encountered the natural telepathy so beloved of bygone fiction writers—on a remote and incredibly ancient planetoid where the last intelligent creature was dying in agony when they found him. A member of the expedition whom I met said the mental impulses were so vivid that three men went mad through suffering the same experiences as their subject, who in any case, was beyond being able to give useful information.

Some of you may have read about the Mattus thought-transferer, which simplifies interchange of brain-messages, but the machine is far from perfect and I know from experience that all sorts of strange things happen unless everything is adjusted to a precise degree of accuracy. Latest misunderstanding had caused a spot of trouble near Delta Kappsa, whereupon headquarters promptly withdrew the apparatus from use.

The thing still danced and guffawed before us. We tried walking towards him with hands raised in the universal gesture of friendship. He retreated a pace or two, although



showing no particular signs of alarm. When we paused it pointed its finger again and dissolved into helpless, lunatic glee.

"I'm beginning to feel like Pop does," said Tubby, showing vague irritation. "We haven't come all this way to be laughed at."

"Try the book," urged Hartnell, again. "Roughly speaking it comes under the heading of intelligent life. It's dressed, after a fashion."

It was—if you could call a piece of rag loosely draped round the middle being "dressed."

The book Hartnell mentioned was Professor Erriksen's ingenious pamphlet. Apart from sign language and this little volume we had few facilities for communicating with inhabitants unable to comprehend English or Universal.

Over a period of more than fifty years, Erriksen and his assistants had worked in a corner of the Arts building at headquarters laboriously hammering the professor's theory into shape. He'd got an idea that all creatures communicating by sounds capable of being varied—that is, excluding those which employ monotone codes—first uttered the noise which came easiest to their voice-boxes; therefore such noise would naturally represent expression of their greatest need. From this premise, after the fashion of physiologists building a complete replica of a vanished animal from one small bone, Erriksen had codified a series of comparatively simple vocabularies.

I picked two or three most likely to fit the present instance, switched a loudspeaker amplifying circuit into the inter-com and began grunting guttural monosyllables.

Our amplifiers are small but powerful. In emergency they can be used for calling assistance and it's easy to hear them as far as a couple of miles away.

First sounds caused the object to dive panic-stricken into the mass of purple grain-stalks from which it had emerged.

"That's wiped the grin off his face, anyhow!" said Tubby, with evident satisfaction.

"He didn't seem to understand, though."

Patiently, we waited a full ten minutes until two white, staring eyes in a black face peered hesitantly from the undergrowth. When we made no move, the object eventually emerged—much more subdued than before. It grovelled before us, muttering and whining.

I picked another vocabulary and asked, "Who are you?"

The way the thing froze with incredulity made our hearts leap.

"It actually understands!" breathed young Hartnell. I rarely remember his being more awe-struck.

"Good old Professor Erriksen!" said Tubby enthusiastically.

The object commenced to bow up and down in unmistakable homage. There could no longer be any possible doubt concerning its human characteristics.

"Look!" I yelled. "Look what he's doing now!"

I'd forgotten the amplifier remained switched on. The row nearly deafened all of us and echoed back and forth across that scorching plain. The native—or whatever it was—took to his heels and vanished in a hazy black streak, howling gibberish as he went.

"He's human," I said, more subdued. "But how did he get here? And how many more like him are there?"

"We'll probably know before long," said Hartnell, ominously. "They'll be looking for us, all right, once he tells 'em what he's seen!"

It was almost time to report to the ship. At least, I thought, help would be forthcoming when I recounted what we had found. "What's really needed here is a trained ethnologist," I said. "He'd be in his element."

Hartnell gave a short, barking laugh. "You know very well, Pop, why ethnologists aren't carried by Inter-X ships. It's just that in places where we go there can't be any new races of human beings for them to study."

Tubby, who had been pondering over matters in his own plodding, thorough way, mentioned something to which I hadn't given much thought. "That black chap we saw just now—he started shouting something when he ran off. Did you understand what he was screaming about?"

"Only one or two words," I said. "He rattled 'em off too fast for me to hear properly. There was a phrase about 'The Great Ones' or 'The Great Ones are coming!'"

"Hm," said Hartnell. "Nice to know somebody holds us in proper respect—even if it's only a primitive savage with a black hide!"

"Well, let's hear what they say back at the ship." I switched on, waiting for the controller. He spoke, as always, precisely one second after my watch-needle touched the mark. "Control here. Make your report." Never any polite enquiry about difficulties; never any personal interest in the squad's welfare; never any doubt but that we would be awaiting his pleasure at exactly the time we'd been told to contact him.

"Individual believed responsible for the footprint has been seen. He is now heading away from us through undergrowth in a direction approximately 128 degrees."

"Pursue and apprehend this man without delay," ordered the controller. "Ascertain his identity and ship in which he travelled. Report these details immediately on emergency frequency."

Young Hartnell began to grin with malicious glee. I had to think quickly. Controllers don't like their dignity upset.

"Individual appears native to Fellik," I said. "Primitive, dark-skinned type responding to Erriksen Vocabulary No. III (a)."

"Native to——?" We could almost see his eyebrows scattering question-marks. "Wait."

Tubby chuckled. These two bright young sparks could express their opinions freely, but I daren't make a sound while

the switch was up in case it became audible in the ship.

The controller came back, thoroughly sceptical. "Give detailed description," he ordered, curtly.

When I'd finished I could hear him breathing hard. Two or three other people were muttering in the background, obviously listening-in and passing low-voiced comment.

"Situation is unusual and may prove delicate," I was told, finally. "You will contact this specimen and communicate with him, reporting back after the usual interval. In the event of discovering any tribe or other similar specimens in reasonable numbers, call ship at once on emergency frequency. It is not proposed at present to despatch further parties to your vicinity. That is all."

"How nice of 'em," said Hartnell, sarcastically. "Isn't it amazing how they always leave some poor devils carrying the can for them?"

I grunted agreement. What would happen if, as the old saying expressed it, the natives proved hostile? Singly they might be as pitifully powerless as the object we'd seen; in strength we might be overwhelmed and killed outright or even sacrificed to some unspeakable Fellik idol.

We had worked for Inter-X long enough to know that headquarters suffer from two obsessions (1) a horror of provoking trouble by our innocent activities; (2) a haunting fear that one day a ship may report other beings capable of making space flights.

Regulations laying down procedure for setting foot on inhabited planets are voluminous and bewildering, but in bald, brutal reality these rules boil down to the official belief that sacrifice of a few men is worth while if a full-scale conflict with the natives is thereby avoided. Which is all very noble and idealistic, no doubt, but hardly comforting to the men concerned, who are actually forbidden to use speed-gamma pistols against intelligent creatures, even to save their own lives.

Still, as Tubby remarked once before in a tight corner, we signed on for this business with our eyes open and we can't grumble if one day Inter-X calls on us to keep the bargain.

Headquarters' second dread concerns space-crews and radar-observation men more than scientific specialists. However, all on board invariably receive in their copy of flight orders peremptory instructions to call attention instantly to anything which might concern alien interplanetary travellers. But, as Hartnell might say, Almighty Altair himself knows very well that the highest form of life we've come across yet isn't within a couple of thousand years of space-flying.

"Well," I said. "maybe we'd better push on. Though how they think we can run fast enough to catch that thing while cluttered up in atmosphere suits is beyond imagining."

We set gravity-reactors to allow of covering the ground in huge, bounding strides. Our boots crushed Fellik's weirdly-hued vegetation against sunbaked soil every time we landed. To conserve oxygen—the suits carried 100-hour supplies, but there's never harm in keeping plenty in reserve—we were using a certain amount of air from outside. This was a mistake in a way, because heat from the scorching plain filtered through also, defeating the Bergmann insulation, and after a time we felt uncomfortably warm.

"Phew!" said Hartnell, sweat running down his lean, brown features. "Does this plain go on for ever?"

"We've come to the end of the cultivated patch. Is Laughing Boy still hiding inside somewhere, do you think?"

"The way he started running made anybody think he never intended to stop."

We bounced on for nearly another two miles before Tubby, "panning" his camera to catch the landscape, suddenly grabbed my arm in a grip like a tree-octopus from some swamp on Hamor. "Look! There he is! And four more with him!"

The little group had emerged from a slight fold in the

ground. The creature we had seen previously was quite easily distinguishable, both in appearance and by the way he urged the others towards us. The four were much taller and seemingly adult, one of them being particularly hairy. All were as black as molon-berries. They seemed reluctant to approach.

"Cut off the gravity," I said. "They'll be scared stiff more than ever if we take ten-yard strides."

Approaching the small ridge, however, we became more interested in what we observed beyond. A flat slab of stone had been raised on hinges, revealing an opening about nine feet square—and running down apparently into the bowels of Fellik swept a broad flight of genuine, honest-to-goodness steps.

Upon our approach, the five natives ceased jabbering and prostrated themselves. One must have squinted irreverently through his fingers, though, because when they found us examining the strange staircase all of them crowded round, bowing and scraping, apparently urging us to descend and all the time chanting a word which sounded like "Mankton." Professor Erriksen's dictionary didn't say what it meant. It couldn't have been anything to do with that strange reference to the "Great Ones," because I caught that phrase as well once or twice.

"This calls for caution," said Tubby doubtfully. "Suppose we get down there and they shove that slab back? It looks heavy. We might not manage to open it again."

"But creatures like these couldn't possibly have built it," protested Hartnell.

The point hadn't escaped me. Personally, I considered it made the situation all the more sinister. Who had, in fact, constructed this entrance? And where did it lead?

"I'd better talk to the ship," I said. "I suppose five of these objects might be described as a 'reasonable number'?"

The controller's tone of voice coolly implied that my news

was no more than he'd expected. "Your reception is apparently friendly," he said, approvingly. "Suspend all other duties for the time being to make fullest investigation of inhabitants, according to Schedule B, Paragraph vi. To avoid alarming the natives it is not proposed to send further personnel at present. Report again not later than twelve hours from now."

Tubby drew a deep breath. "A pretty way of handing us the can to carry and telling us to get down the stairs! I don't like this, Pop. Besides, I've always suffered from a touch of claustrophobia."

Claustrophobia? He was to suffer a good deal worse than that before the job had been completed.

A few signs and an odd grunt from the Erriksen book expressed our willingness to follow the natives, who, led by the hairiest of the four grown-ups, moved backwards down the stairs. In the presence of his elders, the urchin who had laughed at us seemed definitely subdued.

Vega's harsh glare faded as we progressed. I cast an apprehensive glance over my shoulder, expecting to see the big stone slab falling mysteriously into place, but it still held itself open. Subdued light caused the filter-plates in our helmets to click back one by one until our eyes looked upon shaft-walls through plain, transparent morynium.

The stairway came to an end. Before us stretched a long, high-roofed corridor where smooth, stone-faced walls glowed faintly with mysterious radiance. At an intersection some fifty yards farther on, the five savages bowed themselves out, disappearing to places best known to themselves and leaving us standing near the entrance to an impressively-large hall, softly lit and supported by richly-carved columns.

"Well, well," said Hartnell. "Wonder who lives down here? And judging by the size of this place they might suffer from claustrophobia, too."

We were not left long in doubt. Approaching barefoot

across the shiny floor, walking in stately fashion along the central avenue between the pillars, came two tall, thin figures swathed in handsomely-embroidered robes. Their features were human, their skins white, although projecting jaws and heavy brow ridges lent their expressions a frowning dignity. The elder raised a pale palm in greeting. His fingers were fantastically slim and delicate after the gnarled, black digits with which the savages had gesticulated.

"A multitude of welcomes, O Great Ones," he said, in sonorous tones. "A thousand-thousand times has the sun revolved—and a thousand-thousand times yet again—since last thou came to us."

All the dignity was on his side. You can't maintain a god-like demeanour straining your ears to disentangle a series of grunts, cooings and tongue-clickings while at the same time thumbing through an Erriksen book. In fact, it wasn't by any means easy to follow his words, let alone understand what they were about.

"This is crazy!" exclaimed Hartnell, after I had translated. "What's he mean—since we were last here?"

"If it's one of those yarns about an ancient prophecy being fulfilled in time to save the situation, I refuse to believe it," said Tubby, firmly.

I told them both to shut up and let me concentrate or else try using the book themselves. I'd have given a small fortune to have a Mattus machine handy.

Hartnell grinned. "Keep it, Pop! You're doing fine!"

"My name is Zemanos," continued the tall, thin, priest-like man. "At my side is Assistant-in-Council Krang. I beg the Great Ones to enter our domain and see the fitting temple we have builded for their servant—Mankton the Oracle!"

That name again—the one mentioned by those black savages outside. Mankton? Somehow the word possessed an evil sound.



"You'd better let 'em know they're making a mistake, Pop," suggested Hartnell. "Tell 'em we're just harmless explorers."

"I think so, too. It might avoid all sorts of awkward explanations later on."

Bearing in mind the difficulties, I don't think I did too badly in struggling to converse with the more-civilised inhabitants of Fellik. I won't keep emphasising the stuttering repetitions and puzzled expressions that punctuated my conversation. Suffice it to say the system worked.

"We have journeyed from far-off worlds," I began, "to seek——"

Zemanos inclined his head meekly. "——Seeking thy servant, Mankton, and finding him gone from the place where he was installed. If blame is to be laid or punishment inflicted for what my people have done, I pray the Great Ones to consider that they acted only in the manner they thought best."

We saw Krang unobtrusively tugging at the other's robe, muttering inaudibly, but Zemanos threw him a reproachful glance and started apologising once more. Both their faces might have been deceptive—framed, as Hartnell expressed it afterwards, "with a built-in scowl"—but I certainly didn't like Krang's looks. He seemed to have suspicions on his mind. I assessed him straightaway as a born mischief-maker.

"In all things we have faithfully followed the advice of Mankton, O Great Ones. Our duty through countless generations has been to him. I pray thee now to come with us into his presence, that he may greet his masters and make his report to them."

Zemanos slowly bowed low, followed rather reluctantly in this gesture by Krang, then moved off, urging us by respectful signs to proceed in his wake.

Hartnell's brief, colloquial summing-up of our present situation did little to dispel the black cloud of apprehensiveness

which lowered over us. "Here's a pretty mess!" he muttered. "What in Ursa Major will Mankton say when he sees us standing there—pretending to be the Great Ones? And won't the high priest or whatever he is be annoyed? Wouldn't it be a good idea to clear out while we've got the chance?"

## CHAPTER THREE

What hands excavated those halls beneath the surface of Fellik we were not to know until Zemanos related his people's history later. But walking between the avenues of great columns we marvelled not only over the spacious caverns, walls glowing with their own gentle radiance, but at the entirely-strange, exquisite designs carved across roofs and supporting buttresses. That, I know from experience, is one infallible sign of true civilisation—when creatures ornament their dwellings with beautiful works for the sheer pleasure of gazing upon them.

One vast hall led into another, seemingly greater, although after a time the spaces became too huge for our range of vision to accommodate fully. Yet the decorations grew perceptibly more ornate and the columns more impressive. Carvings represented no particular patterns as we know them—rather were they an infinite series of involutions and convolutions turning continually inwards upon themselves, leading the eye upwards and onwards, cunningly directing attention all the time to objects of greater admiration which, they hinted, lay beyond.

Zemanos turned from time to time, as though anxious to ensure we followed. His assistant occasionally cast glances over his shoulder, too, but Krang's expression held suspicion rather than hospitable concern.

At length we all halted before a smallish door in an alcove. Zemanos pressed his foot upon a button of white metal set in the floor, whereupon the door slid to one side revealing a

recess which could be nothing else than an automatic elevator. He seemed to accept our familiarity with such a device as quite matter-of-fact.

"The Place of Obeisance, where we have placed thy servant Mankton, lies deep beneath the surface, O Great Ones," he said. "There he rests safe from the terrible heat outside and from earthquakes which occasionally cause roofs to fall at higher levels."

Not knowing what to say in reply, I nodded, indicating that this was wise precaution. I hoped no earthquake might cause collapse while we were around.

We travelled downwards in the elevator for a full two minutes. There was no means of gauging our speed, of course, but the initial velocity was considerable.

"Think it's safe to open our helmets, Pop?" inquired Hartnell. "I suppose the air's breathable. We were only wearing suits to escape being sunburnt, anyway."

I looked at the elevator walls, manufactured from that mysterious substance which emitted its own radiance. "I'm not happy about radio-activity," I said. Then I had a bright idea. "Check it on your exposure meters, Tubby."

He consulted little dials. "Quite safe, as far as I can see. Zemanos and his friend don't seem to take much harm."

"Probably used to it. Still, let's wear the helmets a little longer. We might as well keep up the mystery for prestige purposes."

"Surely they've spotted us for men by now?"

I shrugged. "Why keep calling us 'Great Ones,' then?"

The elevator braked smoothly but powerfully and came gently to rest. The door opened and a corridor lay before us. Obviously, this approach to Mankton's resting place was some sort of private entrance, no doubt reserved for high priests and the like.

At the end of the passage, Zemanos paused in some embarrassment. "Would the Great Ones desire to consult their

servant immediately—or would they deign to refresh themselves in my humble dwelling which lies nearby?”

I intercepted the broad, enthusiastic grins which Hartnell and Tubby exchanged. I sighed. “O.K. Apparently we’ll have to take the helmets off, after all.” Turning to Zemanos, I inclined my head with fitting gravity and said, “After our long journey a little food would be welcome.”

The words were hardly out of my mouth when Krang’s peculiar expression made me wonder whether we’d fallen into a trap. Did the Great Ones possess such a normal and ordinary habit as eating?

With further bowing and scraping, however, Zemanos led off to the right and eventually we came to a comfortable, high-roofed chamber which was obviously a living place. Broad, comfortable couches surrounded a low table laden with queer fruits. There were plates, pitchers and bowls of yellow metal, exquisitely designed and chased. The walls, apparently of delicately-coloured alabaster, glowed as though with inner light.

Standing at a respectful distance was a girl—young, fairly tall and dressed in a neat, white robe. She would have been beautiful by our standards, except for that peculiarly large square jaw possessed by all the inhabitants of Fellik. Her eyes were dark and intelligent and she had long, black hair coiled in loops upon her shoulders. At first I took her for a serving maid, but Zemanos called her across and begged leave to present his daughter.

“Her name is Jereta, O Great Ones,” he said. “She is a comfort to her father and provides pleasure for all our people with her music.”

Music? I wondered whether I’d slipped up or if Erriksen’s book might be lacking in certain particulars. On second thoughts, it would be nothing short of ungracious to criticise the old professor’s work in any way; the greatest marvel of all was that it worked as well as it did. How, I wondered, had races speaking a strange tongue ever managed to com-

municate with each other before? What a long, boring, laborious task they must have endured in learning each other's language word by word.

And with mention of the word music I found myself thinking of other things. Those carvings upon great pillars in the upstairs halls and the chased patterns upon the plates, for instance—but we had seen nothing resembling a picture or a sculpture. How many art-forms did the people of Fellik posses? I wondered, too, what weird noise we might experience when the "music" burst upon us. "In interests of cordial political relations," states the handbook, "susceptibilities of extra-terrestrial creatures must be offended neither by word nor gesture." Whatever cacophonous wailing assaulted our ears we must accept with simulated appreciation. Such things formed part of our Inter-X duty.

Then I became aware of Jereta standing before me holding a bowl filled with a sweet, milky substance and obviously waiting patiently for me to take it. I glanced at Hartnell and Tubby. They had removed their visors and were reclining at the table, eating fruit and little, doughy cakes with undisguised enjoyment.

I slipped back my own helmet, smiled my thanks to the girl and drank.

"Hah!" said Krang.

Over the rim of the bowl I perceived Zemanos shake his head irritably, as though indicating that by such exclamation his lieutenant had overstepped the mark, whatever secret disapproval he might entertain.

I walked to the table and, under cover of reaching for a luscious-looking bunch of juicy pink berries, said in a low voice, "Krang's spotted us! I've got an idea that the real Great Ones—whoever they may be—don't bother with ordinary appetites!"

"How is it the old boy Zemanos hasn't protested, then?" asked Hartnell.

"Well," said Tubby, "there's no need to speak in hushed

whispers! They can't understand!"

"Playing a waiting game, no doubt. If you ask me, there isn't much love lost between 'em!"

"We can play a waiting game, too, till we see how the land lies. I'll try to get him talking."

When I moved away from the table Krang had gone. Zemanos still bowed and scraped and smiled after his fashion, but it was difficult to guess his inner feelings, hidden as they were by that strange, permanent scowl. The overhanging, bony, eyebrow-ridges made the eyes of all three—even Jereta—seem fierce and primitive in their fixed stares.

"Tell me," I said, "how your people came to Fellik."

The old man looked blank for a moment, then exhaled audibly in understanding. "Forgive me, O Great Ones. I had forgotten that the holocaust occurred after thy departure and that even thy all-embracing intelligence might not keep touch with events. Suffice it that from the million-million specks in our own universe and in the galaxies beyond thou hast unerringly located the insignificant globe to which Mankton has been removed." He threw a shrewd glance of inquiry which heightened my suspicions. "It is correct, O Great Ones, that thy journey here was no haphazard call?"

I nodded with fitting gravity. "We set out with the express intention of landing upon Fellik," I said, truthfully.

This seemed to upset his calculations a little. For a few moments he gazed silently at his folded hands, obviously assembling his thoughts before beginning the story. Incidentally, I hope everyone will remember that any highflown language constitutes a very free translation of an awkward tongue. It represents the essence of his communications, as it were, rather than a word-for-word report.

"It is superfluous," he began at last, while we little dreamt of the head-reeling astonishment about to explode among us, "to recount how, in the distant mists of time, thy space-ship visited our poor civilisation on the other world and left Mankton among us as an oracle from whom we might

seek enlightenment and guidance——”

The other world? Had I heard his remarks aright? If so, it meant creatures elsewhere had mastered inter-planetary flight. I shuddered to think of headquarters' reaction to the news. The entire personnel of Astronomy and Politics would commence to gibber and run round excitedly in little circles.

Coming out of these reflections with a start, I heard Zemanos saying “——Therefore the scientists concluded that a collision of the worlds was inevitable and that all life must perish. They predicted no more than a glancing blow, but the titanic weight of a wandering body more than 2,000 miles in diameter would sweep the atmosphere away and cause solid rocks to flow like ocean tides, even if the world was not actually broken into great pieces. Also to be feared was the effect of friction, liberating a vast, instantaneous conflagration capable of searing every living creature and plant across half the globe.”

I took time out to translate for Hartnell and Tubby, who had nothing to do but stare in hungry curiosity, trying to guess from expressions flitting across my face some clue to the story's progress.

“This is fascinating,” said young Hartnell, enthusiastically.

“Therefore,” went on Zemanos, “the government of the time decided upon mass migration to a safe home. Each member of the population was registered and allotted a ticket corresponding to a place in the vast fleets of space-ships that were to be built. The entire resources of our economy became transformed overnight. No more goods were manufactured for civilian consumption; every active person was recruited by the government labour regiments; exploration and research ceased; building projects came to a halt—all energies were adapted with incredible speed to the great migration scheme.”

A determined, resourceful and disciplined people, obviously. I reflected upon what I'd read of crises on Earth in the distant past—usually wars rather than cosmic



disasters—when civilisations recklessly flung every effort into a battle for survival. Upon those occasions, Man especially proved himself capable of almost superhuman concentration—a one-track-mind attitude in which nothing mattered except pressing on towards an essential object. All other pursuits, however worthwhile, found themselves ruthlessly thrust aside; there was neither time nor consideration for anything except that which assisted in realising the aim.

And yet, only by some such gigantic feat of organisation could Fellik's present inhabitants have transported themselves from their former home—racing against time and the fiery demon which hurtled upon them from the skies. It must have been an exhilarating adventure. And, quite frankly, one which I was thankful not to have experienced. Moreover, a job like that needed a breadth of vision possessed only by invincible Man—and did not Zemanos' people for some uncanny reason bear close resemblance to our own species?

"Catastrophe came upon us more quickly than we had anticipated," droned on the old man, eyes fixed upon the almost transparent skin of his white, sensitive fingers. "The attraction of our own world speeded the wandering body in its rush towards us to an extent which had not been calculated by our mathematicians. There was a certain amount of panic, rigorously suppressed. Day by day it became evident that the point of impact would occur in the area occupied by our own civilisation. This was nothing short of irony, for almost all other land regions were covered by jungles and forests through which indescribable monsters roamed. In one place, mobs tried to seize a space-ship they believed ready for taking-off and great numbers were shot down by the guards."

Stories of that world's last hours must have been handed down by participants in the exodus. Finer elements of description were lacking, yet it did not need much imagination to fill in the appalling details—great hurricanes and

dust-storms darkening the sky at noon, earth tremors growing continually in violence, volcanic fires bursting through to flicker redly against lowering, sulphurous clouds.

Jereta moved among us handing out some sort of wine in tiny golden cups. Her face was pale and tensed, betraying the effort of resolution with which she maintained calmness while hearing again a story which each time horrified her. I imagined every person on Fellik knew by heart this great, heroic narrative, yet its drama must perforce bear strongest upon more sensitive minds among them.

"Our first thought was for Mankton," said Zemanos. "A special expedition, every man injured to some extent by being continually thrown to the ground as the earth heaved in agony, cut its way through the crowds to his temple and brought the oracle safely inside the space-ship—the first which was ready to depart. The other world almost completely filled the heavens, dark by day and flaming white by night. People went mad upon seeing Mankton depart. They wept, they swooned, they cut themselves with knives."

I don't think it was with conscious dramatic effect that the old man paused then, bringing the full force of his staring eyes to bear upon me, but cold tingling sensations shivered along my arms and legs.

"None knows what happened after the space-ship left. It was the only one to escape. Thousands of others became overthrown at their launching sites when the earth heaved itself into gigantic folds and floods of white-hot lava rushed forth. Those in the first vessel, speeding away to safety, saw a number of additional ships launched hurriedly—so hurriedly and carelessly that one by one they turned and fell in flames.

"For five days the survivors watched that terrible torment of the world they had left. On the sixth day the collision occurred—a cosmic blow beyond power of description, sending out great blasts of heat and immense showers of debris."

He fell silent, and somehow I hesitated to interrupt his meditations.

At length, I said, "And so your old world was destroyed."

His eyes looked at me again, penetratingly, from their deep, bony sockets. "Oh, no. But surely the Great Ones, having visited there in search of Mankton, must know it still exists?"

The situation was rather delicate and, frankly, I found myself at a loss. Also, I felt something of a fool for asking the question. Naturally, the genuine Great Ones, wishing to see again "their servant Mankton," would go where they'd last left him; therefore they'd know whether the place remained or not. All I could do in the emergency was assume a very wise expression, as though I'd been testing Zemanos, and ask how long the survivors took to reach Fellik.

The old man shook his head sadly. "We have no record. The miracle is that they arrived. But for one fortunate coincidence they would never have done so. Mankton repeatedly emphasised the importance of sufficient food for a long journey. Conditions at take-off, as I said, were little short of chaotic. Anxious to obey instructions, the expedition loaded him into a store-ship containing six-months' rations for an entire city and on which our people were to live until crops might be harvested on a new globe. Aboard that vessel were no more than thirty-six people."

"Then——?"

"Calculations had again been inaccurate—or the crash of worlds had altered conditions in space. Instead of a six-month journey to a neighbouring planet, the ship found itself adrift in space, heading out across the awful void beyond our own system."

"But surely," I protested, "there must have been some method of steering. How was the ship propelled? By a rocket system?"

Zemanos shook his head again, making his long white hair and beard sway gently. "Of such things I know nothing.

People were born in the vessel and died and yet others were born. Years passed—decades—centuries, for all I am aware." Then he spoke a sentence that made my blood curdle. "Food ran low. Some that were born had to be killed ere they had scarcely entered upon life. Bodies of those that died were used to help sustain the living."

Cannibalism! Yet as Hartnell said later, after I'd recounted the story to him and Tubby, "What would you have done?"

Back at headquarters, the Law Division (which comes under the general heading of Government) are still arguing about four men who, six years ago, just managed to get away in an emergency lifeboat from a space ship that was about to blow up. All food was eaten in the course of a long journey. The crew knew they could survive for not more than another week—and the nearest point of safety lay more than a fortnight distant. In one of those instances of incredible heroism which occur now and again through the ages, a member of the party cut his own throat during the night, well-knowing what his companions would do. In fact, he actually left a note urging them to take that particular course. The lifeboat landed safely at the depot on Karma II. Helpers entered the craft to find three men, barely alive—and in an adjoining cabin the remains of their gruesome meal. Fortunately, the hand-written note cleared survivors of suspicion of murder, but the law wasn't at all happy. Apparently there are regulations concerning disposal of bodies and what had happened couldn't be covered by any existing rules. As I said, they're still arguing about it.

Forgive the diversion, and let's return to the story of Fellik. Somehow the wandering ship arrived, possibly drawn by accident into the planet's gravitational field, and made a landing of sorts. From amid the wreckage crawled a handful of half-crazy survivors.

When Zemanos began to relate his epic, I'd been wondering from precisely where these people had sprung. I daren't make any direct inquiry because—as a member of

the Great Ones—I should have known all along. At first I thought they'd merely travelled from a nearby satellite of very much the same size and configuration as Fellik, but when the old man spoke of decades, perhaps centuries, elapsing during the space-ship journey I became more and more concerned.

Inter-X takes a good deal of quiet pride in its achievements of blazing trails through unknown depths of space beyond man's present borders of colonisation. It became more and more evident we were heading towards someone else's territory—someone who might not take kindly to having strangers streaking across his ether and prying about his planets. Probably this area counted as belonging to the mysterious Great Ones. Headquarters would be very worried indeed when we told them.

"The multitudes inhabiting Fellik," went on Zemanos, "are sprung from those few survivors who lapsed into savagery a thousand-thousand years ago. Since then we have gradually progressed under Mankton's guidance until thou seest us today—enjoying a civilisation probably not quite so important as that which our ancestors built up before the days of the holocaust, but one which is tolerably happy and prosperous."

I nodded solemnly. "During our wanderings across space we have visited many worlds. Upon none save our own have we found a people so advanced in culture and invention," I admitted, truthfully.

A million years, he had said. Progress must have been slow. On Earth half-a-million years at most had been necessary before man evolved from creatures half-monkey, half-human to a being capable of building a Machine Age. What happened before that—whence Man's ancestor came—was a mystery never to be solved.

"May I hope that amid the many wonders the Great Ones have seen they retain clear memories of our original home?" asked Zemanos, hopefully. Sufficiently diplomatic not to

wait for an answer, he moved across to the wall on the right and pulled down a small lever. A panel clicked up, revealing a wall-map. "Here is a drawing of our old home. The shaded areas, of course, represent land, the remainder deep oceans of brine." It was like no world I remembered. "This part here, is where our ancestors lived. All is now far beneath the seas that swept in after the wanderer ripped vast strips from the globe's surface." He sighed. "But in the order of things, that object from outer darkness will wreak no more damage. It remains firmly held by our world's attraction, converted into a satellite rotating in a steady orbit approximately 250,000 miles distant."

During all this time Hartnell and Tubby had been looking on helplessly, trying to maintain expressions of intelligent interest. When strain began to tell, they relaxed for a while by refreshing themselves from the bowl of fruit. Tubby even smiled at Jereta once or twice in friendly fashion but received no encouragement.

"See here, Pop," said Hartnell, "don't you think it's time you wiped that horrible, self-satisfied look off your face and told us what all this clucking and grunting's in aid of?"

"Oh, sorry," I said. "As a matter of fact, I didn't mean to gloat, but really I'm getting the hang of this Fellik talk quite well. I can go for several words now without looking at the book."

"I dare say," declared Tubby, coldly. "But what's the old boy been gibbering about?"

I gave them what I like to think was a masterly precis, whereupon they both studied the map with more interest.

"It is the third planet, Akobo, of a star which we call in our language Jabussek," continued the old man, patiently. "It revolves every  $24\frac{1}{2}$  hours and travels round its sun once in 368 days. Impact of the wanderer flung its axis from 72 degrees to about 67 degrees from perpendicular——"

Young Hartnell, I noticed, had stiffened and stood staring at the map with bulging eyes, holding tightly-clenched fists

at his sides. "Eight other planets also revolve round that star," he said, in a strangled voice. His face, normally such a healthful brown, became suddenly pale and strained.

"What does the Great One say?" whispered Zemanos, fearfully.

I didn't bother to translate. I was too fascinated by Hartnell's next words.

"Two million years ago!" he muttered, quoting as if by confirmation the old man's earlier statement. "A thousand-thousand times has the sun revolved—and a thousand-thousand times yet again! Slowing down through the ages from 24 hours to less than  $24\frac{1}{2}$ —and from 368 days to less than 366!"

"Please!" begged Zemanos, grovelling at my feet. "Please—what does he say?"

Still looking at Hartnell's slightly-moving lips, I told him. "The Great One recognises the planet from which you came. There have been many changes——"

"Recognise it?" yelled Hartnell, triumphantly. "I'll say I do! It's Earth!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

When Hartnell emitted that exultant shout I could have kicked myself for not recognising the truth earlier. Previous argument has proved the impossibility of manlike creatures developing upon more than one world. Yet this very fact opened up a breath-taking concept—our present race was not the first to raise a civilisation upon Earth. And when I say "the first" I mean, of course, within recorded time.

The broad canvas presented its picture clearly. Ancestors of Fellik's people acquired great knowledge and culture; as we have learned, they even conquered space after a fashion. To them came the mysterious Great Ones—in attempting to guess whose origin, purpose and appearance the imagination floundered. Legends brought across the terrific void by survivors provided no inkling. Only material clue was Mankton—who might or might not confide in us. Meeting him was a prospect I secretly dreaded.

In addition to those escaping in the space-ship, others on Earth must also have survived the holocaust and have similarly lapsed into savagery. I could see how Man had gone down hill, as it were, for thousands of years, reaching eventually a nadir from which he had risen again to become modern Man. And those relics which science declared to be skulls of the earliest human beings were really nothing of the kind—they represented Man in his middle period, recovering from the greatest blow in the world's history. A disaster, in fact, which had given the Earth her moon, and I wondered idly what those early men thought when, in their terror, they saw it shining whitely in the sky where before



had been only little, twinkling stars. But we were still as far as ever from learning whence came the Original Man who built the first civilisation.

"I rejoice that the Great Ones remember," said Zemanos, thankfully. "Now will they realise why we must live in these underground halls, for even through the generations we have not yet become accustomed to the fierce sun which beats upon Fellik and whose rays would injure us severely." He smiled for the first time, shyly and wistfully. "It is said that Jabussek's light and warmth spread gently, being very pleasant to the features. This is so?"

I nodded gravely. "But there are creatures here who venture outside and appear to suffer little harm. Who are the dark, hairy men we first saw?"

He seemed reluctant to discuss the matter. "Poor souls," he said, at last. "They are weaker brethren, unable to resist the call of the sun, which they worship." He tapped his forehead significantly. "Until Mankton enlightened our ancestors on the other world, the sun was worshipped there. Among our present people are those who still have the urge to bare their bodies before the cosmic rays. Many of them die for their folly. The remainder run round on the surface like demented folk, often crying out in delirium. They serve a useful purpose by warning us when fires break out among dried crops or when other events of note occur." Our arrival, I imagined, must have been one of these.

The botanist in me felt the old urge for knowledge stirring. "No doubt they assist in cultivation and harvesting, too?"

Zemanos smiled. "That is unnecessary," he said, gently. "The upper portions of the plants are useless. Our staple food comes from tubers which continually grow upon lower roots. They are gathered from beneath the ground by workers who tunnel upwards. Other fruits are cultivated in hothouses on lower levels."

Tubers on a grain-plant? If this were a typical instance, I foresaw months, perhaps years, of work tabulating vegetation

on a world so topsy-turvy. Moreover, it explained why we saw no tracks near the crops.

"Ask him about those black chaps," suggested Hartnell, rather belatedly.

"I have done. They're sun-worshippers—throwbacks to the old world. They're crazy."

"Obviously," said Tubby. "Else why should that small boy have laughed at us?"

Hartnell nudged me in the ribs and guffawed. "You tell him, Pop!"

I thought it about time we got down to business. "We would like to meet your Council of Government," I told Zemanos. "Can that be arranged?"

"The matter is already in hand," he assured us. "I have the honour to be chief of the regional administration. Our work is completely autonomous, except that I must make report to the Central Senate twice a year. Krang even now spreads word of the Great Ones' arrival among the elders. A conference will assemble immediately after the Period of Melody."

What, we wondered, might that be?

"We hope thou wilt deign to remain here and enjoy it with us," went on the old man. "It is customary at this hour. Today's performer is my daughter, Jereta. She has the principal place in all Fellik among violinists. Her talent is rare and peculiar."

He walked across to yet another panel cunningly built into the walls of the chamber. It slid back to reveal a large, black, funnel-shaped aperture. "Here it is that Jereta will play. Everywhere upon our planet—even in far-off Busetta and Akton-Karo—everyone will cease their activities and listen."

Young Hartnell stuck his head forward inquiringly.

"Apparently a system of sound broadcasting," I said. "Wonder how it works?"

A great deal of thumbing through Eriksson's book was necessary before I could assemble sufficient word-imagery to make necessary inquiries.

"I do not understand the principle," admitted Zemanos. "The machine was built exactly as Mankton instructed us. So far as I know there is nothing except this funnel, together with many smaller ones in places where it is desired that the sounds shall emerge." He added a sentence which appeared to me like a semi-apology mingled with reproof. "We have never questioned Mankton's instructions; we have only obeyed."

Influence of that strange oracle grew more pronounced all the time. It pervaded the atmosphere everywhere in Zemanos' spacious house. I caught myself wanting to glance nervously behind, as though fearing observation from an all-seeing eye.

Jereta entered, carrying a queerly-shaped instrument of polished wood. The violin bore no resemblance whatever to any musical apparatus we had seen before —not even the ancient ones in the Cultural Antiquities Museum at headquarters. I suppose Zemanos used the word merely because sounds were produced by means of stroking strings. As I told Hartnell later, when he raised some trifling technicality of description, no one appreciates the difficulties of language translation until they've actually tried it.

We fell silent and listened. Sitting some three feet from the mouth of the aperture, Jereta rested the instrument upon her knees and commenced to caress a series of short, white cords with her finger-tips.

The result was quite impossible to recount fully. Soft, languorous, singing noises emerged, rising and falling in no perceptible rhythm and bearing not the slightest resemblance to music we knew. At first the sounds were low and melodic, insinuating themselves into the listener's mind and, as it were, twining intangible tentacles upon his emotions. Then, having grasped attention, the notes quickened and grew louder,

soaring irresistibly in a wild, crescendo gallop to heights where nothing existed save a mad race across whirling cosmic wildernesses. In that aeolian ecstasy we knew naught save an urge to fly higher and higher in company with the unendurably screaming strings—onwards and upwards through eternity at a pace beyond all believing, until excruciated nerves went mercifully numb.

I doubt whether true unconsciousness actually overtook us, for I remember vaguely what might be described as a descent from those unimaginable heights, cushioned upon kinder, more restful music.

Lying back upon the divan, limp, exhausted and soaked with perspiration, I said, "That's the longest ten minutes I've ever known!"

Hartnell grinned wanly. "You mean fifty-five minutes."

Wonderingly, I looked at my watch and found it was so.

Jereta and Zemanos stood smiling beside us. The girl spoke for the first time. "The Great Ones found merit in my music?"

"Indeed," I said, rather breathlessly. "Indeed we did."

"Today she played as never before," said the old man, fondly. "Sometimes her music is overpowering." That was one way of describing it, I thought. "Presence of the Great Ones has magnified her talent. I knew it would be so. Therefore we have departed from custom and recorded today's broadcast. Fellik shall hear it again only on occasions of great festival."

I wondered how often they had occasion for particular rejoicing and hoped it wouldn't be while we were among those present.

"Now," said Zemanos, in more businesslike tones, "may I suggest we proceed to the Council Hall? Everything is in readiness for thy formal welcome to Fellik, after which we shall be honoured to escort thee into Mankton's presence."

"This is it," I told the others. "Let's replace our helmets. I've got an idea we'll look more impressive that way—in spite

of getting laughs from that small boy!"

We set off in the old man's wake through more massively-pillared halls until at last we stood before huge, bronze-coloured doors elaborately decorated with those weird, fascinating patterns. The doors parted to reveal two groups of venerable persons attired in robes similar to those worn by Zemanos and Krang, but of simpler design. Not until I saw Krang himself, standing with persons to our left with a strange, almost gloating expression in his fierce eyes, and noticed how Zemanos walked to the assembly on our right did I begin to experience qualms.

Hartnell, observing my expression, said quickly, "What's the matter, Pop?"

"Trouble!" I said, briefly. "I think there's open rivalry in the council! It looks as though the factions are gathering with their principals and won't have more to do with the other lot than they're obliged!"

His swift glance brought confirmation, and he whistled softly. Fortunately we were conversing through radio sets in our suits, so that the council members heard nothing. Not that they'd have understood, but something might have been gauged from tone of voice.

"I disliked Krang from the first," declared Tubby. "He's going to need watching!"

I wondered if it were merely imagination which made Krang's henchmen appear tougher and more unscrupulous than the others. Was it, perhaps, that like clung to like? Or could there be some tribal alliance? All drew themselves up proudly upon our entrance, but the eyes of those on the left stared more boldly—more suspiciously.

Ceremonial was stately and prolonged. We were escorted to three large chairs standing side by side upon a marble dais, and perched ourselves there while the council, still divided into its now-very-obvious factions, paraded on either hand and listened to Zemanos intone an address of welcome.

Krang also made a speech saying he was glad to see us,

but in a manner that made the old man throw him several nasty looks. Certainly, any quiet sarcasm or subtle phrasing he might have included were beyond my linguistic capabilities, and for all I knew Zemanos could have been displaying sheer spite.

Then the councillors each had a go, taking turns one by one from either side of the room, and it began to grow very boring.

"For the sake of sweet Sirius!" exclaimed Hartnell. "How much longer are these lot drooling on?"

"Don't be too anxious to get it over," I advised. "Next item on the programme is a visit to Mankton!" The more I thought about this ordeal the stronger grew flutterings in my stomach.

"What's your guess about Mankton, Pop?"

I pondered deeply, assembling such facts as we know or could deduce. "Well," I began. "he was taken to Earth by the Great Ones somewhere about two million years ago——"

Tubby's hissing intake of breath showed that a particular amazement had only just dawned on him. Maybe he'd been too busy with his cameras to take notice fully. They were still whirring gently, recording the council's welcome.

"And roughly about a million years later he was brought here in the space ship. Somehow I get the impression Mankton doesn't confide a lot in Zemanos, otherwise the old man would possess a much fuller record of what happened on Earth. As it is, he seems to know little." I paused, admittedly for effect. "Yet this puzzles me—precisely who or what is Mankton? He is more than two million years old; he is able to help Fellik build up a civilisation, including such little refinements as a broadcasting system without radio—and he was left on Earth in the first place for a reason I wouldn't even guess at."

"A sinister catalogue," admitted Hartnell, soberly. "But even more sinister is the existence of the Great Ones who took

him there, presumably intending to call back for him later—in three million years, maybe!”

We fell silent for a little while, during which a tall, thin councillor with a beard even longer and whiter than that worn by Zemanos droned on unheeded.

“He can’t be living—not in the way we know it,” said Tubby, in a subdued voice.

Somehow our discussion didn’t seem very profitable. “Let’s wait till we lay eyes on him,” I suggested. “Surely this ceremony of welcome can’t go on much longer.”

“As a matter of fact,” said young Hartnell, “I think this skinny chap in the nightgown’s the last.”

The councillor to whom he had referred so disrespectfully at length folded his hands, bowed and withdrew to where Krang’s company were standing, whereupon Zemanos took the stage again. “Members of the Council, O Great Ones, have severally accorded thee their welcome to Fellik. Will it now please thee to visit thy servant Mankton in the home we have provided for him?”

He proceeded with stately tread towards the far end of the hall, immediately followed by Krang, with our three selves next and the council members bringing up the rear. Pausing at a concealed cupboard, he waited while two acolytes produced elaborately-trimmed and colourful ceremonial robes and placed them upon his shoulders, presumably in honour of the occasion.

Then he raised a large bronze baton, bearing it before him with both hands held high above his head. At the end of the great chamber we came upon a further pair of huge, metal doors, this time ornamented with designs that for some reason made my blood run cold. Impressions were somewhat similar to those created by Jereta’s mysterious music—there existed no discernable theme yet the pattern, this time by sight instead of sound, created definite emotions. Resisting the hypnotic terror which attacked me, evoking a wild desire to cover my eyes and flee, I decided the carvings

had one particular object—to deter unauthorised persons from trespassing in Mankton's sanctuary. I noticed Hartnell and Tubby goggling in sheer fascinated horror. The others seemed suitably solemn but not otherwise affected, probably because they had seen the things before.

Then Zemanos beat upon the doors thrice with his baton, producing a dull, booming sound as if from a great gong.

Slowly the massive pieces of metal slid back, revealing yet a further great hall capable of accommodating many hundreds of people, and there—some twenty paces before us—stood Mankton.



## CHAPTER FIVE

I don't quite know what we expected to see. Frankly, I'd never envisaged any definite material form—rather had I accepted previous mentions of Mankton as implying merely some important, rather evil presence without pronounced shape.

But Mankton had shape, all right! He stood there, fully fifteen feet high, on a huge, square plinth of dark-green marble, propped inside four carved pillars of exactly similar stone. He bore no resemblance, of course, to a human being, strictly speaking, he was not even a machine.

We were staring at something so entirely alien to our own life and thought—and so entirely beyond our understanding—that I found hairs standing upright on the nape of my neck.

"Look," said Tubby, breathlessly, "the carving on those pillars is exactly the same as the columns in old Zemanos' hall!"

"I expect that's where they copied it from."

To what extent had Mankton really influenced Fellik's civilisation? And how had he communicated with them? I saw no aperture from which sound might emerge. Young Hartnell made some frivolous suggestion about "tickets shooting out of a slot with the right answers," but that was obvious nonsense.

Suspended from tops of the four pillars hung a huge, half-globe of crystal, barely resting upon the surface of the plinth. This ten-foot wide container was filled with some viscous, transparent liquid in which remained submerged a highly-

curious and tremendously-complicated arrangement of hundreds upon hundreds of curving, interlocked white rods. That was all. But for what it was worth the gadget merited the name and reputation of Mankton.

With an effort, I tore my eyes away to see how Zemanos and his friends were faring. All lay prostrate in attitudes of abject homage for a full two minutes before the old man hauled himself to his feet and announced, "Here, O Great Ones, is the oracle placed in our charge on Akobo. See the sacred boundaries outlined in metal—exactly as was the case when Mankton was originally installed in our company."

For the first time I noticed two circles of inch-wide, gold-coloured material set in the stone floor. One marked off a point some four feet from the plinth; the other enclosed a circumference fully a yard farther away.

"The Great Ones will remember," went on Zemanos, "that the farthest circle is that beyond which no mortal may venture; within confines of the perimeter nearest us Mankton hears our questions and, in his ineffable wisdom, answers or remains silent."

Hartnell, fast regaining his equilibrium and with it his normal attitude of disrespect, said, "Ah! I couldn't understand why he hadn't said hello to us. We aren't near enough. Maybe he's short-sighted or hard of hearing."

I confessed to being appalled. "You don't mean you actually want to try this thing out? Why—no one knows what might happen!"

Zemanos bowed and gestured, urging us nearer the oracle. My feet definitely didn't wish to move inside that golden circle. I gazed upon the obscene mess of white rods, showing through the bowl like tangles of pale, dead worms at the bottom of some loathsome pool, and knew in that moment that Mankton was evil, soulless—and definitely to be feared.

Very much against my will, I stood with the old man on my right, Hartnell and Tubby on my left, and looked

upwards at the huge crystal globe. Remainder of the councillors waited in a semi-circle behind us, carefully preserving a regulated space between the factions. It looked, said Hartnell, as if both lots were afraid of being contaminated by the others.

“O wise Mankton, whom we worship—,” began Zemanos.

This was bad. Never yet had idols commanding any creatures' adoration been known to bring other than eventual ill fortune.

“—We bow before thee on this auspicious day in the presence of those who have come from far regions to greet thee after many years and to call for thy accounting. Through the generations our people have obeyed thee faithfully—now we beg that thou wilt make true reports of this fealty to the Great Ones who stand here.”

He bent low once more and made a gesture with his slim hands as though indicating his duty was satisfactorily completed and he was thereby transferring the entire business to us.

Somewhere in the bowl's depths a few bubbles formed and rose sluggishly to the surface.

A soft, muttering sigh of expectation came from those behind us. “Mankton—he speaks!”

What happened next shook me to the very roots of my being. A great, deep voice boomed through the hall, its vibrations actually detectable against the material of our suits.

“These are not the Great Ones!”

For the moment Mankton said nothing more. But it was quite enough. We ought to have confessed the true position at the outset instead of allowing misunderstanding to drag on. There was little hope of bluffing our way out.

But the most dreadful, flesh-creeping thing of all was that the oracle spoke in English!

Not only that, but we knew from sharp intakes of breath

that the councillors understood, too. Moreover, it was a signal for open revolt.

"Now we're really sunk!" gasped Tubby.

"Grieving galaxies!" said Hartnell. "Did you hear what I did? How in Castor and Pollux could these bewhiskered relics know what he said?"

"Better think about that later! How do we get out of here?"

Krang, standing safely beyond the golden line, snarled defiance and recrimination in a grating, vindictive tone. "I call upon all councillors," he said, "to witness that Zemanos has grown too old in body and in mind to perform his responsible duties to the people of Fellik. He has allowed imposters to poison his intellect and actually escorted them into the sacred presence of Mankton." He glared at us, then at his chief, pointing his finger dramatically towards the door. "I say to you—go! It is time for the council to meet and appoint a new regional chief! This shall be done forthwith!"

Growls of assent sounded from his own followers, drowning more dignified murmurs of protest among Zemanos's supporters.

The old man struck an impressive attitude and spoke at length upon the unseemliness of wrangling in the temple.

Krang remained unimpressed. Feeling, I suppose, that the oracle would be on his side, he suggested an appeal for guidance.

We gathered that this could be done by any senior member of the council who felt strongly enough about a particular subject.

With a gesture of obvious contempt, Zemanos drew aside his long, embroidered robe and walked back to the great, bronze entrance doors followed by his supporters. We went with them.

Alone before Mankton, Krang then embarked upon a longwinded, grovelling ceremony that ended with some

phrase about "—Spare us then of your wisdom, O Mankton, and say what shall be done in this matter so gravely affecting the welfare of our people."

No bubbles rose, no deep voice boomed through the hall. The oracle remained silent.

Zemanos turned upon the crestfallen Krang one long, burning glance and walked out. A lesser man might have laughed in triumph.

"Stop!" shouted Krang. "I hereby give notice that the question be raised at a General Assembly before the Hours of Sleeping!"

Zemanos, taking no apparent notice, proceeded upon his dignified way.

Hartnell chuckled. "I'll bet Krang's so mad he could spit!"

"It isn't funny," I said. "If you ask me we're in real trouble. You know what headquarters thinks about taking sides in political matters."

"Aren't we working according to the book? What's the phrase I want? Something about 'communication only with the established government.' Wouldn't you call old Zemanos the established government in this part of Fellik?"

"For how long?" asked Tubby, darkly. "If you ask me, that chap Krang's a cunning piece of work."

Our plump cameraman had put his finger right on the spot. What happens if you support a particular 'government' only to find suddenly that the other side have taken over? Is your position particularly enviable? And I had a strange idea that Zemanos was no child in questions of political intrigue, either.

I enlarged upon this after we'd been shown to a resting chamber boasting some very comfortable divans and left there with Zemanos's beautifully-phrased apologies in our ears. There were elements which struck me as vaguely suspicious.

"Look here," I said, "don't you think the old man's taking Mankton's spanner-in-the-works a bit too calmly?"

"What else could he do?" asked Hartnell. "He jumped to conclusions about us being the Great Ones. We didn't tell any untruths."

"We didn't deny it, either, as honest persons should have done."

"In any case, it was those crazy black men who first started the idea."

"You're missing the real point," said Tubby. "The question is—how did that horrible oracle know?"

On long, boring trips across the void, when days and weeks drag so slowly that space-madness born of monotony creeps upon those who fail to keep their minds fully occupied, I often read books about Earth and its history. One volume, I remember, dealt learnedly with the superstitions of semi-primitive tribes and revealed some of the tricks whereby unscrupulous priests maintained their sway. Secret voice-pipes and hollow idols in which a man might stand to address assemblies loomed large. Was Zemanos deceiving his followers in similar fashion, pretending to join them in worship of Mankton but in reality being master all the time?

"If this is true," I told the others, "I don't see how he does it. He was standing with us all the time."

Young Hartnell chuckled. Somehow, I decided with irritation, he never seemed to laugh much until we found ourselves in particularly unpleasant predicaments. "Krang's face was a picture when he got no answer."

"Remember how Zemanos had walked away by then? Perhaps he was too far off to work the voice gadget."

Tubby, who had been thinking hard, came out of his reflections to inquire "How about Mankton speaking in English? That means Zemanos understands, too!"

This had us not only baffled but worried. I decided we

could do nothing except play a waiting game and let Zemanos make the next move.

Our patience was not unduly strained. Less than half an hour later the chieftain craved audience, bringing with him Jereta, who seated herself modestly in the far corner and followed the proceedings with bright-eyed interest.

After brief, dignified salutations, Zemanos wasted no time in coming to the point. "Although they have been among us so short a time, the Great Ones have surely observed where disturbing elements lie in the affairs of Fellik."

He paused and we nodded.

"Peace and prosperity in which our people have lived for generations are now threatened. I come to appeal for intervention against the upstart Krang and his supporters——"

Delicately as I could, I informed him of our unalterable rule—no politics. He didn't like it and didn't bother to let his expression conceal the fact.

"Surely," said Hartnell, "this is a matter for Mankton, whom you say has been counsellor and guide to Fellik through the ages." He waited until I had translated, then went on, "Krang received no encouragement from the oracle in the assembly hall a little time ago."

Rather to my surprise, Zemanos looked worried. He glanced round almost furtively as if for support from Jereta, then said "Mankton does not always speak. There have been occasions when I have wondered why. If it were——"

"Father!" The urgent cry caused us all to turn suddenly. The girl had left her seat and run across to tug warningly at the sleeve of his robe. "Be careful! Do not criticise Mankton in the presence of his masters—!" Her eyes sought ours, half-pleadingly, half-defiantly.

Hartnell, Tubby and myself exchanged meaning looks. Then I framed with my lips the words which had for some time been on my mind. "He knows!" The others nodded.

"Worthy Zemanos," I confessed, "it is only right for me to tell you that we are not the masters of Mankton—we are

not from the Great Ones!"

We wondered what their reaction would be. The girl, suitably astonished, flung a hand to her mouth and collapsed upon a divan, staring as though ears had deceived her.

Old Zemanos, however, didn't turn a hair. "You have come to us from a far-off star, travelling across the sky. Therefore, your civilisation is greater than ours, which has lost the secret of interplanetary travel. Are you not then Great Ones indeed?"

Modestly, Hartnell admitted this statement contained more than an element of truth. I told him to stop clowning and apply his mind to our dilemma. "Obviously," I said, "Zemanos didn't know what to make of us at first, so he took a line that was certain to please. And can you blame him? Weren't you flattered to be called a Great One?"

I questioned the chieftain again. "It is evident that Mankton puzzles you in many ways."

He knitted prominent brows and tugged perplexedly at his beard. "Sometimes—often when our need of advice seems greatest—the oracle remains silent. Why should that be?"

Frightened, the girl leaped again to his elbow. "Father, what are you going to say?" He soothed and silenced her with an affectionate gesture.

"Perhaps there are truths the people of Fellik should not know," I suggested.

A sudden light shone in his pale eyes, although I couldn't at that moment interpret the meaning. He moved closer and whispered, "Now I have for long thought secretly that——"

Panic-stricken now, Jereta pulled him away, crying frenziedly "No! No! Think of the Great Ones! Suppose they were to come— It means death—" Her lovely face was contorted with terror, and she moaned again, "Death for all of us——!"

We seemed to have experienced more cold shudders since we'd landed on Fellik than could be good for anyone's nervous system, yet even the mysteries of sinister Mankton



did not equal the disquiet engendered by this girl's fearful hints. What was Zemanos's proposition?

At last he managed to communicate his dreadful idea. "I come more and more to believe," he whispered, "that Fellik would benefit if Mankton were to be destroyed!" He dropped his gaze, as though stricken by unspeakable guilt.

The girl buried her face in her hands and sobbed heartbreakingly.

## II

Somewhere outside sounded the brazen clangour of a gong. The old man lifted his head as to a challenge and said, "It is the call to council! Come—we will confront this impudent challenger, Krang, and defy him!"

Council occasions on Fellik, apparently, called for a great deal of solemnity and ceremonial. The immense hall at the end of which Mankton squatted was completely filled by members of the populace, standing in immobile, orderly rows, while councillors filed to a series of concave tiers of seats immediately before the oracle. Features of all were carved as if in white wax, bearing the strange, unhealthy patina which marks creatures that never see the sun.

We found ourselves part of a procession behind Zemanos, whose entry was preceded by acolytes and standard-bearers holding aloft sacred images. Vessels of gold-coloured metal, shaped in weird, exotic designs, were swung to and fro to the sound of trumpets, emitting a queer perfume. Various gongs boomed at intervals, but we could not determine their purpose. Chanting of hidden choirs somewhere in the background echoed across the high roof.

For purposes of effect, we had once more adjusted our helmets and were using a certain amount of oxygen. I sensed a rumbling sigh of astonishment from the people as we entered, with one brave voice emerging to call attention of his neighbour to "the Great Ones in their wonderful robes." Evidently word of our arrival had gone around.

Zemanos waved us deferentially to seats on either side

of him. Hartnell said he hoped we wouldn't divert too much attention from the old man because it looked as though he'd need all support he could win from the crowd.

Proceedings opened with a long, frank statement from Zemanos, explaining why the meeting had been called. He was quite reasonable and unemotional about it all. Dignified murmurs of approval, mingled with a few growls of dissent from the opposition, followed his final sentence.

Matters hotted up when Krang's turn came. He started a fierce harangue against things in general, speaking so quickly and with such vehement, staccato intonation that I had the utmost difficulty to understand. At length he threw us a dirty look and commenced to drop dark, subversive hints.

Hartnell nudged me unobtrusively. "I think Krang's guessed, too—about us, I mean."

I shrugged. Obviously, with our features visible through the clear, morynium facepieces, we too clearly resembled the inhabitants of Fellik for them to mistake us for anything but men—queer-looking by their standards, perhaps, but nevertheless men. They were to some extent an intelligent people. They possessed machinery, agriculture and an addiction to "music," such as it was.

"I don't like this," said Tubby. "He's going to call our bluff—publicly!"

"What can we do if the mob turn nasty?"

Young Hartnell—confound him!—grinned again. "Let Pop turn up his outside amplifier volume and yell at 'em! It worked with the black boy, didn't it?"

"Shut up!" I said. "Things are reaching a climax!"

They ought to have known this, even without understanding Krang's torrent of accusation. The Assistant-in-Council continually thrust his finger in our direction; his eyes flashed hatred and his convulsively-working lips spat flecks from the foam that gathered round his mouth.

"So I say to you, O People of Fellik, that these wanderers from nowhere are enemies of Mankton! Be not deceived

by those who call them Great Ones! Mankton's all-seeing eye pierced their cloak of falsity without hesitation and exposed their imposture to the council!"

By way of reply to incredulous murmurs from the assembly, he swung round upon the council. "Is not this true? I call upon all elected representatives to testify that they heard our holy oracle speak to this effect not two hours since!"

Now the fat was really in the fire. I could see which way Krang's cunning mind was working against the old chief. Sure enough, here it came. "I indict Zemanos as unworthy to hold office—by reason that he has harboured in his house three creatures whom Mankton denounced!"

Mutterings of anger swelled quickly into a frightening roar. One or two nervous councillors slipped unobtrusively from seats occupied by Zemanos supporters and joined the opposition.

The old chief leaned towards me and said, "Krang's mischief has inflicted serious damage. The situation is slipping from my control. You must use your great powers—it is the only way to save us!"

Great powers? Such as what? Circumstances definitely forbade use of speed-gammas and inflexible Inter-X rules were equally against meddling in political affairs. I recalled vaguely something Hartnell had said about the frequent ill-fortune of innocent bystanders. That was us, all right.

"Play for time!" I urged. "Persuade them to appeal once more to Mankton! He'll give no answer, but at least we'll gain a few minutes to think!"

Trading upon growing familiarity and by reason of knowing we were only human, Zemanos gripped my arm. His fierce eyes gazing into mine, he said commandingly, "Unless we conquer Krang he will destroy all of us! Can you give no sign which will impress the populace?"

Hartnell's voice sounded in my helmet. "For the sake of sweet Saggitarius, Pop! Is it trouble?"

"Lot's of it!" I said, grimly. "And not only from Krang. Zemanos is getting panicky now!"

"I've already suggested what we might do! Yell at 'em through your amplifier! If you can imitate Mankton's voice, so much the better!"

The idea was worth trying. "Very well," I said. "Turn your microphones down if you don't want to be deafened."

Quickly running my finger along the columns of Erriksen vocabulary, I selected the proper word, rose to my feet, raised a hand to attract attention and said, clearly and distinctly, "Silence!"

Believe me, I got it! Not immediately, of course, because the booming roar of that word thundered round and round the vast hall, ringing from pillar to pillar and echoing against the far wall. But when the reverberations had died away not a further sound could be heard. The assembly might have become transfigured into life-size wax images.

Seizing the opportunity, I reduced the volume slightly and gave them a few words of sonorous exhortation. "People of Fellik! We have journeyed from far-off worlds to witness the miracle of Mankton! We seek neither to flout his rulings nor interfere with your customs or government. But—" and having seized their attention I lowered my voice to a tone of urgent meaning "—Mankton has not yet said he forbids us to observe his wondrous ways. Pause and think! Is it not for the great oracle himself, rather than mere men, to pronounce his wishes?"

Hartnell chuckled again, deep in his throat, as a vague murmur of obvious agreement reached our ears. "Good old Pop! You ought to be one of the big shots in Diplomatic House at headquarters instead of a hardworking botanist!"

Up bobbed Zemanos then, far from slow to seize the advantage. "The Wise One speaks truth, O people!" (Not the "Great One," now, I noticed, but the "Wise One.") "So shall it be! Let Mankton himself decide!" He directed a glance filled with injured dignity and outrage in Krang's

direction. The Assistant, baffled, glared back wordlessly. If nothing more, we had won our breathing space.

Considerable reshuffle of positions was necessary for the ceremony of consultation. The councillors moved to the other side of their seats, thereby forming a reversed semi-circle round the contraption that squatted on its bulky plinth, while behind them excited spectators pressed closely. Within the curve stood Zemanos, Krang and ourselves, carefully remaining outside confines of the first golden circle.

Fanfare of thin, silvery trumpets ascended to the roof and died slowly away. Attendants reverently bore in the weirdly-embroidered robes Zemanos had previously worn when consulting Mankton, placing them round his shoulders with much bowing.

Out of earshot from Krang, Zemanos whispered to me, "This forms our last chance! I hesitate to consult the oracle! Who knows what he may command? You must openly ally yourselves with me against Krang and his supporters!"

Firmly, I said, "We cannot. It is forbidden by those in authority over us!"

It was impossible to read the old man's expression as he turned away.

The atmosphere of suspense in that hall became almost insupportable. I stared up again at the huge, crystal bowl and its peculiarly carved columns, feeling sweat trickling between my shoulder-blades. Somewhere a drum began beating in slow, measured rhythm.

"Those awful, white worm-like things fascinate me!" said Tubby. "They're like some of your pet fungi, Pop!"

I believe I've written before about the monotony of a botanist's life on most infant worlds to which Inter-X directs us. Fungus and lichen represent the only life-forms there, and I've known times when discovery of yet another subspecies made me feel like screaming. After a particularly prolonged spell of concentrated work I've experienced night-

mares in which planets throughout our own galaxy and even in island universes stretching eternally beyond have been crammed with nothing but fantastic mushrooms. But to compare even the most repulsive fungus with those pale, poisonous, interlocked rods that apparently formed Mankton's brain-substance was nothing short of outrage. And I said so. This time young Hartnell didn't laugh.

At last all was ready for the consultation. Zemanos performed mysterious gestures, bowing and weaving strange patterns with his arms before commencing, "O mighty Mankton! Once more, as through the ages, do we thy servants crave guidance. There have come among us wise travellers from afar, seeking to witness thy wonders and to observe what thy people have wrought upon Fellik. Speak, we beseech thee, to say how we may fittingly welcome these strangers."

Everyone craned their necks to see the signal of the bubbles and were not disappointed. They rose faster this time and more profusely, streaming from certain points inside the bowl like effervescence in a glass of carbonated water.

"You can actually see him thinking!" whispered Tubby.

"Judging by the fizz, he's excited about something, too!" added Hartnell.

"Wait for it!" I said, warningly.

Then the great voice came again, although it was not until later I remembered with certain grim satisfaction that the amplifier in my suit, fully turned on, was capable of outshouting the oracle.

"Hear me, O people!" boomed Mankton. Again he spoke in English, yet all among the vast assembly understood! There were definite signs, too, that the oracle intended to make a very special announcement, for each person present—councillors included—flung themselves prostrate. Doubtless this particular opening phrase indicated critical tidings, for there had been none of this mass-obaisance on the previous occasion.

"These travellers shall be sent back whence they came. They seek to dominate our people and to seize this planet from its rightful occupants."

"O Procyon, give me strength!" muttered Hartnell.

"This I say to you—that the strangers shall be held for a suitable period to determine if others come after. None shall hold discourse with them; none shall provide comfort or sustenance on pain of highest punishment. Should others arrive they shall be treated similarly. I repeat—do no violence but send them hence. These are orders of the Great Ones! Have any persons been deceived by soft words from the strangers it shall not be held against them, for these travellers are full of evil cunning. Therefore I say to you—shun them! Remember always that thy true welfare rests with the mighty and beneficent Great Ones who in the course of time will return to demand an accounting."

The bubbles ceased to rise and deathly silence once more reigned in the hall.

## CHAPTER SIX

I drew a deep breath. "At least they don't intend to kill us out of hand!"

"Back to the ship!" said Hartnell, thankfully. "What could be more pleasant? Good old Mankton! Can you imagine anybody else letting invaders off so lightly?"

"It's too good to be true."

"Don't forget there's a jail sentence or something," Tubby reminded him. "How long do you think they'll wait to see if a rescue squad arrives?"

I hadn't the faintest idea. In any case, a relief force would apparently receive the same fate as ourselves. For the first time I actually looked forward to calling the controller on emergency wavelength, although it wouldn't do to forget that we'd been sent out for the purpose of collecting definite information and censure might be forthcoming because we'd spoiled chances of getting it.

Meantime, Mankton's orders were in process of execution. Rising from the floor, everyone edged fearfully from our vicinity as though afraid of catching some dreadful and infectious disease.

Zemanos motioned to a group of men waiting in an archway on the right, whereupon they moved forward and lined up near us.

There was no mistaking the intention. These men formed an escort to our place of incarceration. Meekly we went with them.

I expected some sort of demonstration—an outbreak of hostile growls, maybe—as we walked with what dignity we



could muster along a hurriedly-cleared corridor through the rows of waxen-faced, immobile populace, but no sound came. Their faces were set and expressionless, mere repetitions of overhanging brows and huge, jutting jaws. In none of their eyes did I read pity.

We were guided wordlessly from the temple, along corridors where walls glowed like all other stone construction with that queer, natural radiance and eventually left by ourselves in a small, bare chamber. The door slid immovably shut without a sound. We were alone.

In the absence of furniture I made myself comfortable by squatting in a corner, turning off the oxygen and throwing back my helmet once more.

"Well," said Tubby, disgustedly, "it looks as though you were right, Pop. Old Zemanos obviously works the oracle himself."

"He's been playing a double game," declared Hartnell. "Cunning old so-and-so! All his timid by-play about wanting to destroy Mankton was only a blind for our benefit—so that we should be certain the thing operated of its own accord. He rehearsed that scene with the girl very well." His tone acquired extra bitterness at the thought of such deception. "Jereta played her part admirably! Then, because we wouldn't help him against Krang, he told the mob to get rid of us."

"Notice how cleverly he cleared himself, too," I remarked. "Made himself out to be a poor, deceived mortal, taken in by soft speeches from us—the ruthless invaders!"

Nothing was more obvious, I reflected, than that we were among true members of a human race. Wherever we had wandered in the universe so far, we had found only Man capable of lying. Seeds of deceit, apparently, had been mysteriously sown in the brain of genus homo more than two million years ago—and their flowers of falsehood still flourished, even out here, centuries removed from Earth. Good and evil intentions were to be found on other planets

among other creatures, certainly, but such attitudes were invariably open and free from subterfuge. Did this unique ability to speak one thing and act another make Man more—or less—intelligent?

“I’d better call the controller,” I said. “Here goes.”

Back in the ship they were naturally keeping watch on our emergency frequency. They had a query, too.

“Where are you?” asked the controller, with what I imagined to be a faint undertone of irritation. “Surface examiners report no trace on their screens.”

“In jail,” I said. “We’re held for an unspecified period before being expelled from an underground city. They threaten to treat further visitors similarly.”

“Keep listening,” ordered the ship.

Hartnell grinned. “That’ll give ’em something to think about.”

I waited, far from carefree.

The controller returned with the decision. “Consideration has been given to the emergency——”

(“Glad they consider it as bad as that,” muttered Hartnell.)

“—In view of the natives’ attitude no further parties will be despatched until you have returned to report more fully. Meanwhile, you are authorised to use your discretion within existing regulations, at the same time not losing sight of the fact that the expedition’s primary object is to obtain information. That is all.”

As I said earlier, I was expecting the sting in the tail.

“‘Discretion!’” snorted Hartnell. “They really mean—‘get out of the place by yourselves if you can!’”

“I’ve tried the door,” said Tubby, “and it’s got a trick fastening. Anyway, I can’t move it. Let’s swallow a couple of food tablets and get some sleep.”

His suggestion was excellent. Whether Zemanos hoped to weaken our resolution by lack of nutriment I don’t know,

but he'd certainly overlooked the fact that our atmosphere suits are fitted with three-day supplies of meal-capsules, in addition to four pints of drinkable water.

We must have dozed uncomfortably for a couple of hours before I woke with a start to find two figures bending over me. They were Jereta and a villainous-looking man whose backward-sloping brow fell so low that it almost seemed he possessed no forehead.

"I bring Drobno," she said softly. "He wishes to help the Wise Ones!"

Suspicion flared in my mind. What new trick emerged?

Was this girl hatching further plots in company with her father?

I saw her shrink upon reading my expression. "You do not believe me?"

Becoming wider awake I noticed fear mingled with the disappointment scrawled across her features. "What was the truth about that highly-dramatic conversation with Zemanos? You remember—when it was suggested Fellik would benefit if—" I broke off, looking meaningly at her companion.

She drew herself up. "My father spoke truly! Nor is our view secret from Drobno. He is one of us——"

Her sincerity could not be denied. Mysteries deeper than any we had yet guessed swirled among Fellik's queer population.

"You mean there are people who doubt Mankton? Who think he should be——"

"Ware hidden microphones," said young Hartnell. I didn't know he'd been listening. I don't think, either, that he understood the trend of our talk, but mention of the word "Mankton" must have aroused his caution.

"There are those who would willingly destroy him—if they could!" said Jereta, in a low, bitter voice. "Tell me, O Wise One, what is a nation's destiny?"

Helplessly, I gaped and goggled. At such a time, in such a place, I was expected as an authority on political theory and apparently expected to give a brief, extempore outline.

I did the best I could. "Our most advanced thinkers consider that when a nation has achieved a state of civilisation sufficient to merit self-government it shall be free to elect a parliament to pass its own laws. Every adult person shall have right to exercise his or her vote uninfluenced by any consideration except the publicly spoken or written word, in which all people may take part. The parliament shall be answerable to no one save the people."

As I finished, I discovered our previous positions to be reversed. Jereta and the tough-looking Drobno stared as though unable to believe their ears. Then the man went down on his knees beside me and commenced to bang his head quite vigorously on the stone floor.

"Truly," said Jereta, "truly art thou the Wise One!" Her tone was soft and tremulous, but her eyes shone like excited stars. Obviously, something was going on that none of us Inter-X visitors understood.

"Deep in the secret caverns of Fellik," said the girl, "lie books whose contents are entrusted to a chosen few. It is said that these volumes came from Earth in the space-ship which brought our ancestors."

Books more than a million years old! "How could they survive?" I asked. "Even remains of the space-ship itself have long since crumbled to dust."

"Because they were privily taken away and shielded from the elements as soon as our people progressed sufficiently to realise that markings on paper might be valuable." She shrugged shapely shoulders. "Perhaps they even worshipped the books long, long ago. They were incapable at that time of building a shelter sufficient to protect the wreckage of the ship, but these three volumes were saved—unknown to Mankton!"

"Ah!" I began to understand.

"Many pages are crumbling, but scholars have worked for centuries on the remaining portions—always in fear of their lives should word of their activities reach the oracle. Mankton would undoubtedly order immediate destruction of the books and those familiar with their contents."

A great light dawned. "Which are?" I asked. But all the time I knew very well.

"In short," said Jereta, "they describe the true rights and destiny of nations—in almost exactly the same words as you, O Wise One, employed a few minutes ago!"

"And there are among you those who consider your present parliament or council, far from being answerable only to the people, is dominated by Mankton?"

She nodded.

"Is your father one of these?"

"Yes. He has fought in every way he knows to reduce Mankton's influence. The oracle has too great a grip on the people. At every crisis in our affairs they cry for consultation—and our laws say that such requests must not be refused."

Frowns on the faces of Hartnell and Tubby grew more deeply etched while I briefly recounted this conversation.

"At that rate," said the former, "Mankton actually does speak!"

"If you believe the girl's story. Do you believe it, Pop?"

I pondered. "Yes," I said, at last. "I think I do."

"But where does this grim-looking object come in? What's his name? Drobno?"

"I'll inquire."

"He thinks," said Jereta, in answer to my question, "that he has discovered a method of destroying Mankton! It may cost him his life—men have died before in attempting it—but he is willing to try."

Regarding Drobno with a new respect, I asked for details. He was highly enthusiastic about the project—would-be martyrs usually are—and spoke so quickly in a deep, grunting

voice that I couldn't keep up with him. Eventually I let him finish and asked the girl to translate.

Everything hinged, apparently, upon the two golden circles surrounding Mankton's plinth. Beyond the outer perimeter the oracle, so far as was known, took no notice of what occurred; once within the circle answers were received to questions—if Mankton thought fit. To tread beyond the innermost circle meant instant death—should the trespasser possess hostile intentions.

This was unbelievable! How could Mankton possibly know what emotions a man's mind contained?

"We cannot explain if you cannot," said Jereta simply. "We know only that it is a fact. Mankton has been moved on at least two occasions—once when he was taken into the space ship, twice when he was brought to this new temple from the smaller place where he lived for many years. If all persons approaching near immediately died, how would transportation be possible?"

Drobno's deep-laid plan came as somewhat of an anticlimax after all this. He proposed merely to stand within the safety zone and puncture the great, crystal bowl with a long spear, so that Mankton's transparent life-blood would drain away.

"Looks to me like sheer suicide," said Hartnell. "How did these other people die? The ones with 'hostile intentions'?"

"No one knows," Jereta told me. "Their bodies were enveloped for a moment by a beautiful coloured haze and they fell lifeless to the ground. Sometimes their skin had been tattooed in strange markings, but not always. Our best doctors were baffled.

"Did one ever succeed in hitting the bowl?"

The girl shook her head.

"I shall!" said Drobno, snuffing fiercely through broad nostrils. "Before Mankton can strike me with his blue fire I will drive this spear deep into his foul brain."

"Obviously some kind of electrical discharge," pronounced Hartnell. "You know, Pop, he might make it, at that."

Tubby said "Tell him to take a pair of good, stout rubber boots."

"Better him than me," I said. "If he succeeds I don't think headquarters will be very pleased. Can't you understand Mankton's the scientific find of all time? Won't the laboratory lads just love taking him apart to see how he works!"

Hartnell laughed. "I'd say that's a hostile intention. Besides, you speak as though he's a machine. He's intelligent life, isn't he? And you know how careful the regulations say we have to be with that!"

"When Mankton is no more," said Jereta, solemnly, "then the people of Fellik may be truly independent and eat to the full of knowledge. Not only this shadow hangs over us, but the menace of the Great Ones whose purpose he serves. I believe that without Mankton they will never find us—and we shall be free for ever!"

I mentioned a point that had been puzzling me for some time. "Why do you tell us all this?"

She looked at me for a long moment with her clear, pale eyes before answering. "I hoped you would advise me whether the ideas in our ancient books are true and good—and if so, whether you would help us destroy this soulless tyrant."

Drobno made hoarse, barking noises of protest. "The task is mine! It was promised to me—to me, alone!"

"We do not believe your scheme can succeed," I told him. "Mankton will strike you down with his coloured fire."

"I go—I go now! Come and watch if you like—otherwise I will return when my duty is finished."

"Aren't we supposed to be in jail?" asked Hartnell. "Won't we be missed?"

We met no one in the corridors leading back to the vast auditorium in the temple. This time we walked through

no rows of waxen-complexioned figures, made more horrifying by reason of their silent hostility, or stood in the place of honour with brightly-robed councillors. The deserted hall seemed frighteningly desolate. I looked at Mankton, squat and menacing in the subdued light. Machine or not, he possessed a powerful and malignant presence. I began to wish I hadn't come. Evil or benign, was it fitting for a savage to destroy so wonderful a work?

"What if he does?" asked Tubby, callously. "This is politics, isn't it? And we're not supposed to pry into those."

We waited behind a pillar, seeing Drobno enter furtively, carrying a spiked rod some twelve feet long. Jereta, standing near us, breathed heavily with the apprehension which to some extent affected us all.

"Is there no other way?" I asked, doubtfully. "Couldn't he use firearms or some other weapon?"

"Such things are unknown on Fellik," she said. "I have read about them in the old books, but they are forbidden. Likewise instruments of sharpened metal known as knives. Drobno has risked his life many times while making his spear at a secret forge."

It struck me that at least a race without weapons couldn't start wars—nor might they learn sufficient to resist the Great Ones when they came. Already knowing the answer, I inquired the origin of the veto.

Wordlessly, she pointed to the oracle.

The man emerged from a darkened archway some fifteen paces distant, eyes fixed on his quarry intently and the spear poised. Flutterings of panic started in my stomach at the thought that Mankton might already be aware of what was happening. Suppose he raised his giant voice and shouted for help—?

But no tell-tale bubbles rose in the great glass bowl and Drobno still moved menacingly forward. No sound broke the silence except the drone of Tubby's cameras.

Everything happened so quickly that it was like one still-



life scene superimposed upon the next at lightning speed. Drobno was there, standing between the golden circles, ready to strike. He moved slightly. Then came a dazzling, blue flash, brilliant enough to sting the eyeballs, and a crackling sound like stiff material being ripped quickly in two. Drobno's lifeless body was flung fully ten feet backwards and lay there crumpled like a bundle of old rags.

Jereta gave a thin scream of horror, quickly cut short. "Stay here!" I said, and ran with Hartnell to where the man lay. Neither of us had ever seen a more obvious case of electrocution. Both voltage and current must have been enormous, for the metal-tipped spear was completely fused and Drobno's right arm nearly burnt off.

"You see what's happened, Pop? He didn't throw the spear. He still held the other end when it touched the bowl and the current earthed itself through that metal circle!"

I drew a deep breath. "Now tell me how Mankton manages to switch the current on and off when necessary!" I stared up again at the glass bowl, filled with its obscene white worms, and shuddered.

"We'd better get out of here! Leave Drobno. We can't hope to conceal a body, and in any case they'll guess what happened to him when he's found."

Jereta, battling her tears, allowed herself to be led away. "Does anyone apart from your friends know of your acquaintance with——" I jerked my head backwards to where the corpse remained spreadeagled "—with him?"

She shook her head.

Thus, without speaking further, we returned voluntarily to our prison. There had been no hue-and-cry because of our absence.

Before Jereta left I remembered two things that needed to be said. "Tell your father, Zemanos, that we are his friends—and yours—to our utmost ability." The second item was a question that had been raised before. "Tell me, how does it happen that Mankton speaks in our own language and not

the tongue of Fellik?"

She stepped back, staring in horrified surprise. "Your language? Are you then really the Great Ones——?" A pretty mess if we had been, considering what she'd told us of plots that were being hatched.

"Tonight, when Mankton spoke to the assembly, he used a language long known on Earth—one that originated among some of the Second Men long after your ancestors and the oracle had left in the space ship."

Jereta's bewilderment was even more obvious than our own. "Listen!" she said, urgently. "Women are not allowed in the assembly, but tonight I watched from a darkened corner of the temple. I heard Mankton give instructions about you." Emotion raised her voice a semi-tone. "As always, he spoke clearly in the language of Fellik!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

When the girl had gone, young Hartnell squared his shoulders and said, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this, Pop! The whole business is fantastic, of course! Yet there must be an explanation——"

Recent happenings had left me feeling washed out and exhausted. I yawned. Personally, I thought the matter could wait until I'd had some sleep. After all, we could report on everything when we got back to the ship and leave the controllers to decide whether they were interested in Mankton or not.

But this, of course, didn't suit Hartnell. Whenever confronted by a problem nothing except the solution would suffice. I've known him worry the things for days, like a dog with a favourite bone.

He moved to the door—the secret of its lock thoughtfully revealed to us by Jereta—and said, "I'm going to have an unofficial, heart-to-heart chat with Mankton! Anybody care to come?"

"That's impossible!" yelled Tubby. "Why it's——" The fact suddenly sank into his brain and he leaned against the wall, gaping like a fish. "But it might work, at that!"

"Of course it'll work!" exclaimed Hartnell. "If the old oracle answers in English it obviously must understand questions in English! Logical, isn't it?"

I groaned. "I'd much rather stay quietly here until they take us out and set us on the road for the ship."

He laughed. "Scared, Pop?"

"Of course I'm scared! That thing gives me the creeps!"

"So am I—but I'm going!"

There was nothing else for Tubby and me but to go with him. Retracing our steps along the still-deserted corridors I wondered idly why the Council of Fellik didn't bother to guard their temple until it struck me that—as we had so recently and so horribly witnessed—Mankton was fully capable of looking after himself.

We seemed to spend a lot of time staring at the big glass bowl. Here we were for the fourth time—and Altair himself only knew what might happen when young Hartnell started his harebrained experiments. Drobno's body still lay beyond the golden circles.

"Let's go round the other side," suggested Tubby. "I don't like looking at him."

"One side of Mankton's very much like another as far as I can see," said Hartnell, cheerfully. "I don't doubt he'll talk from all angles."

"Come on, then," I said. "Let's get it over."

I looked at the carved stone pillars and the huge plinth, somehow realising for the first time that I viewed something which had been wrought two million years ago. The thought appalled me anew. What else had I seen as old as that? Light from distant stars, perhaps, but certainly nothing tangible except natural rocks. Had Mankton been made with hands? Or what?

Hartnell rubbed his palms together enthusiastically. "Of course, Pop, you know I've a theory about all this?"

"I might have guessed it"

"Come on, come on," said Tubby. "We're waiting to see you make the thing work."

"I'll start with something simple. Now you've got a pretty good knowledge of Kranian, Pop. First give me a simple sentence from old Erriksen's vocabulary, then concentrate on nothing but Kranian. Got it?"

I nodded.

"A primitive sentence—something like 'Is this fruit good to eat?'"

The phrase consisted merely of a couple of grunts and a tongue click or two. Hartnell was lucky, picking on such a phrase by sheer accident. He ought to have had some of the tongue-twisters I'd contended with during my very strenuous translation exercises.

"Your job, Tubby, is to concentrate on nothing but Universal. After I've asked the question, I'll concentrate on English."

Presumably by way of realism, he dived into his suit and produced a couple of the juicy pink berries taken from old Zemanos's table. Placing his feet carefully within the golden circles, he held up the exhibit and asked, hesitantly, in Erriksen Vocabulary IIIa, "Is this fruit good to eat?"

For one dreadful moment I feared my mind might give way beneath the strain. Bubbles were rising sluggishly in the great, transparent globe.

"Let three men only eat of it. If they live it is good for all. If they die none shall eat of it again."

Thus spake Mankton at our private séance—and the wonder of it was that, following Hartnell's instructions, I heard him talk in Kranian!

"Well!" said Tubby. "He actually answered in Universal this time!"

"That may be," said Hartnell. "But to me it was English!"

My jaw dropped foolishly and for a second I was incapable of closing my mouth again.

"That's how it sounded before, didn't it? We heard what was said in English—the council in their own language."

I got my jaw to work again. "Impossible!" I said.

"Hearing's believing! Now let's try experiment No. 2."

I glanced anxiously over my shoulder. "Isn't there a risk someone may notice the noise?"

Hartnell shrugged. "They'll probably think Mankton's having a nightmare and talking to himself. Besides, those awful-looking carvings will keep out the rabble and if I know the councillors they're resting their old bones in bed by this time." He was, of course, incorrigible. "All right, then. Stand by for No. 2. Same instructions as before, except that I'm going to ask the question in English."

Stepping into position again, he said, almost conversationally, "Please identify nutritive properties of fruit displayed herewith—probably genus *Cerasus*."

Many more bubbles this time, and they rose faster.

"Carry out quantitative analysis anti-scorbutic acid and sugar content in milligrammes per litre of pulp and supply figures. Answer will then be given."

"He did it again!" yelled Tubby. "I don't know what it was all about, but Mankton definitely replied in Universal."

"Kranian," I said, firmly.

"All right, all right," said Hartnell, soothingly. "In any case, I know what I heard. Now for Experiment No. 3—and this should be good!"

I'd experienced Hartnell's "good" experiments before. The adjective was almost invariably an understatement. "Alarming" would be nearer a proper description.

Back again at the speaking point, he proceeded, "My name is Hartnell; the rotund person is a clever photographer named Tubby Goss; the elderly gentleman on my right we refer to affectionately as 'Pop.'"

No bubbles, no reply.

"He doesn't seem impressed," said Tubby. "I thought this was going to be good?"

"It's absolute confirmation of my theory," said Hartnell, in a pleased manner. "But get ready now for No. 4 if you'd really like to hear something."

Over the dividing line of the golden circle again, he proceeded to declaim a boastful and highly-coloured account of life as it might have been on Earth in the early twentieth century, cataloguing a long list of scientific achievements.

"Truly," remarked Mankton, "civilisation grows apace. Yet all pales before the record of the Great Ones, whose servant stands before you awaiting their return. Many mysteries still unknown to you are as open books to them. Accept their advice, as given through me, that upon their arrival they may be pleased and grant to you the many benefits in their power."

"Well," I said. "Wonder what all that's in aid of?"

"You'll see," murmured Hartnell, mysteriously. "Listen to this."

He launched upon a concise but necessarily lengthy history of comparatively modern times, again concentrating upon exploration and invention. Not until he mentioned current developments in space travel did Mankton suddenly come to the boil. And I mean almost literally "to the boil." The transparent liquid began to surge around in large, active waves, slopping against the bowl and bubbles swept upwards in such thick streams that the loathsome mass of white rods became almost obscured.

Hartnell's monologue, I noticed, became more and more technical until finally he was reeling off strings of meaningless—to me, at least—mathematical formulae and chemical symbols. Moreover, he spoke so quickly that at one time I wondered whether he hoped to make Mankton burst with the very volume of his information.

"Therefore," he concluded, breathlessly, "I charge you that, if I am not present personally at the time, these matters shall be placed before the Great Ones immediately upon their return."

He slowed down his rate of speech and ended solemnly, with no hint of bombast or defiance, "A question arises whether after this period of time we ourselves have not

become the Great Ones. For what shall we know of them? Or they of us? Who can tell what vast strides will be taken in our scientific researches ere your masters return from their wanderings?"

He paused and stepped back, waiting.

"In the night skies of this galaxy," began Mankton, almost conversationally, "shines a great accumulation of stars called the Giant Nebula of Andromeda. You will know, of course, that this comprises an island universe 900,000 light-years distant by your reckoning. It is not from there that the Great Ones carried me; their true home lies in a galaxy far, far beyond but in exactly the same direction. They streaked across the heavens in their enormous ships on a vast journey of exploration, leaving their emissaries—of whom I am one—upon all habitable planets. Some day they will return to find out what has occurred during their absence. Meantime it is my duty to record all information and to guide events so as to ensure a favourable reception for them."

It was a flat, bald, unemotional statement—spoken almost in a monotone—but it held implications which took our breath away and left us weak and shaken. We were asked to believe that even now somewhere in the wastes of intergalactical space roamed gigantic beings capable of employing periods totalling millions of years to their research trips! Was Mankton lying in order to frighten us? Man—as represented by ourselves, the Second Men, if we excluded the long-exiled natives of Fellik—had succeeded in pushing out puny frontiers occupying a scant 30 light-years of distance. These Great Ones not only traversed more than 900,000 light-years to reach Earth but arrived there more than a million years ago and were still travelling. They had not, in fact, yet begun on the 900,000 light-year trip back to Andromeda.

"Well," I said, when I felt capable of articulating with



vocal chords half-paralysed by awe, "what do you make of it?"

"Mankton's telling the truth!" said Hartnell, slowly. "I don't doubt that for a moment!"

In all my life I never remember feeling more afraid. "But who are the Great Ones? Where are they now?"

A ghost of a smile creased his features. "I'd better ask him, I suppose."

We awaited the answer with something approaching desperation.

"That I know not," admitted Mankton. "I am a servant. I obey, I do not question. Some time the Great Ones will call for my accounting. For the present I wait."

"Look here," I said. "Why should he tell Zemanos and the others to throw us out of the place?"

Next instant I wished I'd kept my mouth shut. Hartnell's grin widened and he said, "How about trying your own luck with the oracle?"

Tubby, joining in the thoroughly ill-timed joke, said, "Go on, Pop! Talk to him as one veteran to another!"

Gingerly, I put my feet between the golden circles. I would far more willingly have placed them inside the coils of a deadly serpent.

"Mankton," I said, "you are afraid of us! We have uncovered your secrets; therefore you forbid the people of this world to converse with us, lest we expose you not as an idol to be worshipped but as a servant of masters who wish to dominate them."

Hurriedly, I hopped back before he could grab me.

"I fear none except the Great Ones whom I serve. In learning art thou and thy fellows as specks beside them, yet all who gain ability to journey in space stand automatically upon the threshold of True Knowledge. To that extent art thou dangerous. Nothing must hamper the Great Ones' activities. That is why I, Mankton, have been allotted my

errand. And what I have now learned makes it imperative that, instead of mere banishment whence thou came, thou and thy companions must be put to death!"

For a long second we stood rooted to the spot. Hartnell broke the spell. "Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here before he finds a chance to tell 'em!"

All three of us dashed from the temple and along the corridors as though Mankton had suddenly grown legs and was chasing us.

The underworld of Fellik remained deserted. Only our footsteps disturbed the silence of those softly-lit passages.

"Which way to the exit?" I panted. "Anyone remember it?"

"Along here, I think," said Hartnell. "Watch out for steps along these side-turnings. If we keep climbing we can't go wrong."

It took nearly half-an-hour to prove this simple statement false. After reaching a succession of dead-ends we halted and looked at one another helplessly.

Hartnell jerked his thumb. "Back to the main corridor—if we can find it. Let's start again from there."

A shadow materialising at a corner made us halt in alarm. It was Jereta, her robe dirty and torn and panic in her eyes.

"O Wise Ones!" she gasped. "The worst has happened! Krang's men have found Drobno's body and questioned his friends. Fear of Mankton has made two men betray my father. Krang is now on his way to the secret room to destroy the books. I ran on ahead." She glanced, terrified, over her shoulder, listening for approaching footsteps. "All Fellik is in uproar. Mankton will wreak vengeance upon us——!"

I translated this for benefit of Hartnell and Tubby.

"Don't worry about Mankton," said Hartnell, comfortably. "I can handle him!"

Jereta stared unbelievably. So did I. "But the oracle has pronounced death! Death, do you understand? Such a penalty has been unknown for hundreds of years—even for murder!"

"Whose death?" I asked curiously. I wondered whether we might find companions in misfortune when Krang's crowd caught up with us.

"You, my father and his supporters—and myself! Mankton has commanded it!"

Young Hartnell laughed. "Getting a bloodthirsty so-and-so in his old age, isn't he?"

I looked at him with growing suspicion. "What have you got up your sleeve?"

He didn't answer, but took Jereta's arm and hurried her away in a direction she indicated.

Abruptly the lighted corridor ended. We plunged into a passage where stone walls were of rougher, coarser material and contained no mysterious element for causing that pleasing, translucent glow.

"Move slowly," pleaded the girl. "The ground soon becomes uneven and we cannot see."

She gasped in amazement as Tubby's beryllium torch slashed a brilliant white swathe through the darkness, revealing how the tunnel closed in ahead of us until we walked perforce in single file. "Oh, my claustrophobia!" he muttered.

"Was nothing else besides the books saved from the ship which travelled to Fellik?" I asked.

"We know not," said Jereta. "Gaps in the ancient legends can never be filled now. There is none to tell us what orders Mankton gave after the vessel landed. Many priceless records and equipment might have been destroyed on his instructions."

"You know," said Tubby, speaking over his shoulder while negotiating the subterranean labyrinth, "if Mankton

harbours such a grudge against space travellers I can't understand why he allowed the trip to start."

"Maybe he was scared for his own skin if the world blew up," remarked Hartnell, cynically. "Or perhaps our ancestors were smart enough not to tell him what they were doing."

I had a clearer and more reasonable explanation. In the stress of times when the moon-to-be loomed ominously nearer from outer space, threatening that unimaginable holocaust, Mankton might not have learned the full story. Obvious advice when the populace wailed about impending calamity in the area of their cities would be to tell them to clear out. This the First Men prepared to do—in no uncertain manner—and if they mentioned to Mankton the possibility of a long journey what more routine than that, among other advice, he should be insistent upon taking plenty of food? And only because they heeded his instruction so well had Man survived to reach Fellik, for without those huge stores of nourishment every soul in the one ship to escape must surely have perished.

"Is absolutely all trace of the space ship lost?" I asked. "Does no legend describe its shape or mechanism?"

Jereta shook her head. "There is a shrine in Borbat, on the other side of Fellik, supposed to mark the site of the landing, but no one knows for certain. Excavation began many centuries ago, it is said, but nothing was found and Mankton forbade further digging."

"But the books——?"

"They were taken from the ship at some distant time in the past and forgotten—even by Mankton. A patriot named Semetara, seeking a hiding place in these lower caverns after being condemned by the oracle, discovered them again accidentally. Only by instinct did he guess that they must be more ancient than any other writings. He let two helpers into the secret, and since then—especially now we know the holy doctrines they contain—only the most trusted persons

have been allowed to lay eyes on them."

The path now stretched so rough before us that I doubted whether the tunnel had been excavated by human hands. The roof grew lower, forcing us to move forward in an uncomfortable, half-crouching position. Air grew hot and foul.

I was certain no one could have found the way unaided. We descended—sometimes gradually, often abruptly—for nearly a quarter-of-an-hour before a hazy patch of light became visible.

"See—the lantern!" whispered Jereta. "Not like your marvellous light, but it serves. Now let us seize the books and remove them ere Krang arrives!"

The illumination was provided by a lump of material similar to that from which the upper passages were constructed. It had been fastened in some way to the wall, casting a gentle glow upon three small, square, black objects propped against a stout wooden shelf slightly below.

I remembered viewing ancient books or their reconstructions in museums. They were huge affairs, clumsily bound in thick leather and containing many large pages hinged together on the left. These books of the First Men were of a size well known today, except that the leaves lay loose in the little black boxes.

We leaned over together to study the crumbling topmost page. Faint, rusty markings upon it resembled nothing I'd ever seen before in the way of written language.

"Handle with care," said Hartnell. "You're looking at something else that's about two million years old, Pop!"

From what Jereta had told us about the contents of these books I would rather have found them than learned all the secrets of the Great Ones. For here, originating vastly earlier in time than our savants knew, lay the essence and doctrine of individual freedom. Judging by Mankton's communications, this precious thing—created by humble Man—lay beyond the otherwise limitless knowledge of his

masters. In other words, what we know as "democracy" was a closed book to them.

Before Hartnell could make some ribald comment about the way I smiled at this feeble joke, I carefully lifted the book-containers and placed them in a Morbach-carrier. However great their fragility I had no doubts concerning their safe keeping. Dr. Morbach's neat, compact invention could hold a piece of gossamer microscopically intact through the roughest journey—and, indeed, had done so many times.

"Which way now?" I asked.

"Come," said Jereta. "Krang will take the shortest route. We will reach the upper levels by another way. How you will arrive at your ship I know not, for the great stones have been replaced in the entrances and guards stand beside them——" She broke off in alarm. "Listen! They come!"

Heavy feet clattered and stumbled along an intersecting tunnel leading to the cavern where we stood. Excited voices grew gradually louder.

"It is Krang and his men!" whispered the girl. "They will have mercy upon none whom they find here."

"What'll we do?" I asked.

"Come! Perhaps we can hide. There is a tiny recess over here."

It was no more than a natural cleft in the rock and must certainly have passed unnoticed without thorough exploration, aided by a good lamp.

As we pressed closely inside, I was struck by a sudden afterthought. "Look," I said. "If Krang doesn't find the books, won't it make him only more furious?"

Tubby nodded. "And more determined to make somebody suffer. Probably us!"

Hartnell thrust a hand inside his space suit, fumbling to find a document in the pocket of his uniform. "Put this on

the shelf, Pop! It'll give them something to think about!"

The pursuers were almost upon us. I threw the papers down, scattered a handful of dust on top for sake of realism and dived to cover.

First came a henchman, bearing a flickering oil-lamp that smelt abominably. He peered round suspiciously. When it appeared the place was deserted, Krang pushed past importantly, heading for the wooden shelf bathed in that dim glow from the rock-lantern.

I saw him stare at the paper for a moment, eyes bulging with delight and lips drawn back snarling from his big, yellow fangs.

He snatched it up, vainly trying to decipher the markings.

"What says the strange book, O master?" asked one of the crew, craning his neck to see over Krang's shoulder. There must have been a full dozen of them, all burly, villainous-looking characters.

Their leader snatched the paper away, crumpling it ruthlessly in his hand.

"I saw writing such as I have not known before," confided the man who had first spoken. "Some of the magic outlines, I thought, bore curious resemblance to faces."

Lesser spirits quailed in horror. What necromancy was this—that men's likenesses stared back at them from a piece of parchment?

"Some things are best not inquired into," said Krang. "None shall read this witchery! This dreadful document shall be consigned to the flames. Now, witness all men that, in the name of Mankton, I destroy it!"

He pushed a corner into flame from the oil-lamp. The paper flared brightly, pale yellow glow from the flames lighting those wicked, waxen countenances and illuminating every corner of the rough-walled chamber. Hurriedly, I withdrew my head into the sheltering cleft.

When the glow subsided, I risked another look, seeing Krang's eyes casting round for further relics. Satisfied that

the secret book had been burnt and that no more remained he crushed the ashes again beneath his heel and imperiously ordered his men away, their footfalls gradually fading in the distance.

"What in the name of Pegasus did you leave there?" I asked.

Hartnell laughed delightedly. "I happened to have a few sheets of cartoons from that last issue of Spicy Fancies in my pocket."

I never read the publication myself; its rather saucy pictorial appeal is directed more to young space-pilots and the like. "No wonder Krang described it as a dreadful document," I said, answering his grin. "He was nearer the mark than he knew!"

I turned to the girl, who had understood the ruse if not our subsequent byplay. "Now let's see if we can find your father."

"I will guide you to a place where you may lie hidden until we discover where he is imprisoned."

We retraced our steps by taking a route in Krang's wake, thinking we should thus be safe. We were in error. They caught us rounding a corner on the upper levels. A sudden scurry and patter of feet sounded somewhere ahead. We turned to flee, only to find ourselves in the arms of a second squad moving silently from behind. They used no actual violence but held us particularly firmly by the arms, urging us once more towards the Place of Obeisance.

The temple was packed almost to suffocation by a host of white-robed persons whose excited mutterings reached us as a low, ominous rumble. The temper of the populace was definitely not pleasant. I sensed enmity and blood-lust amid the swirling emotions of that multitude, whose components no longer consisted of immobile, waxen-faced figures. The inhabitants of Fellik—insofar as represented by those surging crowds, continually moving like the swell on a milky sea as those behind tried vainly to press nearer—had at long last



discovered themselves capable of human emotion. I wished they could have chosen gentler manifestations.

In the cluster of councillors round Mankton's plinth I saw Zemanos, obviously in custody of distinguished guardians although they refrained from laying hands on him.

"Well," I said, rather despondently, "what now?"

"Better wait and see," advised Hartnell. "Don't want to play our trump card too soon."

"Eh?" said Tubby, startled. "What trump card?"

"Yes," I said, "what——?"

"Shush!" warned Hartnell. "Dear old Krang's coming in!"

Demeanour of the former Assistant-in-Council left no doubt about his delight at now being top-dog. He fairly strutted with importance along the path which his supporters cleared with difficulty through the milling throng, his eyes flashing in fierce exultation. He behaved in the same way as all small-minded men overwhelmed by sudden success, pausing to leer triumphantly in our faces as he passed.

Upon reaching the outer golden circle Krang turned and raised his arms to command silence. "Now shall all men listen!" he called, in a harsh, rasping voice which quietened instantly the few remaining mutterings of conversation. "These strangers from the sky seek to seize our world and to oppress the people. Mankton's penetrating eye has perceived the falsity cloaked by their fair words. To me—Krang—and your councillors he has spoken! The fate of the travellers shall be—death!"

Swift intake of a thousand breaths hissed round the great hall and the awful word, uttered involuntarily by as many lips, sounded like distant rumble of thunder.

I caught Krang's eye and knew by his expression that more—and worse—was to come.

"O, People of Fellik! Here, too, stands Zemanos, now execrated by your Council, who has not only assisted the

strangers in their evil designs but with his daughter has held converse with them against the express orders of Mankton himself! Therefore I say to you that these, also, shall die—and as fitting punishment Zemanos shall wield the sacrificial sword!”

Two watchful councillors stepped in his path as the old man stepped forward in horror. “Jereta? By my hand?”

A dreadful, hovering essence of evil hung low in the temple. Within a few hours we had witnessed a people become disrupted by grinning barbarism.

“No!” shouted Zemanos. “It shall not be!”

Krang bowed mockingly. “The choice is yours! These beings from outer space who wear the unholy masks of glass to cover their thin faces from honest men will die as you yourself think fit! So be it with your daughter, whose guilt is no less than your own! She may perish with one swift, painless sword stroke from her father’s hand—or she may die in much more unpleasant manner!”

“What in Cassiopea is that beetle-browed so-and-so saying?” demanded Hartnell. “Poor old Zemanos looks scared out of his wits!”

“Well he may be!” I said, grimly, and translated briefly.

“Oh!” There was a wealth of determination in his one, grim monosyllable. He spoke quickly, in a low voice, concluding urgently, “I don’t care how you do it, Pop—but manage it somehow!”

Once more I raised my hand as a signal to the people of Fellik. Krang smiled gloatingly and did not interfere, imagining we were about to plead for our lives.

“Hear me, all men!” I declaimed, turning up the amplifier good and loud. “If Mankton has decreed that only a punishment long obsolete among civilised people can meet our case, we do not complain. All we demand is the right, under your own statutes, of consulting the oracle before we die!”

We saw immediately that this piece of information—confided to us by Jereta, incidentally, when we were talking about the bad old days and bad old ways—had put the cat among the pigeons.

"These traitors have no claim upon holy privileges belonging to our people——" began Krang, but I promptly shouted him down.

"Who rules Fellik?" I roared. "Krang—or Mankton?"

They didn't take long to make up their minds. A chorus of "Mankton! Mankton!" swelled quickly to a great shout. I knew from Krang's expression that he now loved us less than ever, but he was obliged to concede our demand. He did this with marked ill grace.

Amid a thick, almost tangible silence, young Hartnell stepped forward to exercise his right. Pausing outside the golden circle, he said, "First, get them to hand me a piece of stone or metal."

This request, when translated, was received with marked suspicion. After a brief pause, Krang shrugged and signalled to an attendant, who brought from somewhere a two-pound lump of the strangely-glowing material of which so much of Fellik's underground structure was built.

"Think not," said Krang, mockingly, "that you may injure the oracle by hurling such missiles at him. Madmen have tried such vengeance before——"

"What's he babbling about?" asked Hartnell.

He chuckled when I told him. "Oh," he said, cheerfully, "I'm not going to throw it."

"If you were to take the trouble to learn a few phrases from Professor Erriksen I'd be saved this continual bother of translating."

"Don't worry, Pop. I know enough for what I need."

And with this, while the awe-filled throng gasped at such temerity, he stepped boldly between the golden circles and displayed the chunk of rock to Mankton. When his purpose

had been made thoroughly clear, he spoke—in the phrase I had previously taught him:

“Urh’h (meaning that a question was about to follow):—yakka (this fruit)—n’kong (good)—lah (eat).”

Mankton came through with the answer:

“Let three men only eat of it. If they live it is good for all. If they die none shall eat of it again!”

Krang, the councillors and the mob—not to mention Tubby and me—looked at the rock, then looked at Mankton, then silently goggled. Had the Great One’s emissary gone crazy? What would three men do, trying to eat a piece of stone?

“Mankton’s wisdom is often too great for mere mortals to understand,” began Krang, hesitantly. He looked really worried. Something had obviously gone wrong.

“My friend has the right of yet another question,” I said, coldly, forestalling any mischievous idea he might have about cutting short the ceremony and pressing on with the execution.

Krang bit his lip and looked daggers, but dared not interfere.

“Look, Pop,” said Hartnell, quickly, “this next one’s a bit too much for me. Take my turn and say this——” He gabbled half-a-dozen sentences that made my eyes bulge again. “I could do it in English, of course, but the effect would be lost on the crowd out there.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Hurry up! Krang’s getting ready to spoil it!”

So I reluctantly placed my feet in the appropriate position, the focus of all those pale, staring faces, and said my piece. “O mighty Mankton, servant of the Great Ones, whose word is law unto our people—the interlopers from the skies whom thou doomed to destruction are no more. They have died by the sword in obedience to thy command!”

Amid a bemused hush the bubbles commenced to rise once more in the great bowl.

"It is good!" pronounced the oracle. "Now they are gone let the rightful rulers lead thy people in the paths laid down by the Great Ones!"

I fully believe that for one long, fantastic moment every person in the temple considered his ears had played him false. How could the strangers have been executed? The three of them still stood there outside the golden circles, alive and well. Why did Mankton not know this? Was it really possible that his sanity had given way, like the wretched black creatures on the surface, whose brains were scorched by Vega's unbearable rays? Poor Zemanos sagged against the men who guarded him, not knowing whether to be glad or to grieve. Jereta, exchanging glances with Hartnell, drew herself up proudly and smiled with understanding.

Krang, looking very green about the gills, tried to save the situation. "Be not misled by tricks of evil ones——" he began.

The crowd would have none of it. Amid swelling uproar some bold spirit with a bristling beard and flashing eye thrust himself among the councillors crying "We have been deceived! Think for how long we were taught to tremble at the nonsense spoken by this image! You——" he stabbed an accusing finger in Krang's face "——you pretended Mankton had appointed a new chief! Down with the usurper!"

The bottom had obviously dropped out of everything. A mob is a frightening and unpredictable quantity. During sane, normal moments no one would have dreamed it possible for Mankton's age-old rule to be so quickly ended, but when passions run high only a spark is needed.

We retreated towards the rear of the temple—Hartnell, Tubby, Zemanos, Jereta, myself and a few of the faithful stalwarts. Krang's men were too busy with other matters to

notice us. The character still harangued the crowd in fine style, doing a great job of denunciation.

"That is Laradno," said Jereta. "He is one of us."

I'd already guessed that. If anybody had been to blame for maintaining the people of Fellik so long under Mankton's domination it was Zemanos, yet nothing was being said about this. At the same time, I didn't see what the old man could have done, knowing full well how the inhabitants would have reacted earlier if a single word were breathed against their beloved oracle.

Hartnell's mysterious trick had certainly flung a large-sized spanner into the works—and I wondered how he'd done it.

"Anarchy!" muttered Zemanos. "Anarchy and chaos! Who will save my poor, unfortunate people if they will not listen to me?"

At the moment his poor, unfortunate people were out for blood—preferably Krang's, but anybody else's might do. They pressed nearer to Mankton's plinth, making foremost ranks dig in their heels to avoid being pressed across the golden circle into the area where their words would be heard by the oracle. Some of the old awe still lingered.

Those at the back, however, set up a shout. "Down with Mankton! Destroy the old gods! Away with tyrants!" Intent upon this, they surged forward yelling and gesticulating.

Zemanos tore himself from our little group and almost ran in desperation towards the throng. "Stop! Stop, I say! It is death to touch Mankton in anger!"

Stimulated by Hartnell's ruse—and presumably as a fitting vengeance—many among the crowd fetched loose stones into the temple and began hurling them at the oracle. The missiles clanged with ringing, bell-like noises against the great glass bowl but failed to leave even a scratch. Fury increased with failure until the mob threw caution to the winds and pressed within the golden circles, snatching up fallen stones to hurl

again and ignoring great gashes inflicted upon many of their number by ricochets. Three maniacs rushed to the plinth, climbed the pillars and promptly fell to their deaths amid a crackling blue flash upon touching the crystal globe.

Laradno, observing that no danger seemed inherent in the stone itself, urged on the throng to heave madly at the great plinth. I saw four rows of men combining their strength to overturn the oracle, but it defied all efforts.

"Fools!" exclaimed Zemanos, rejoining us and beginning to wring his hands. "Fools! Does Laradno understand no better? Mankton cannot be destroyed by human hands!"

"How do you mean?" I asked.

He continued to speak, although I don't think he'd heard my question. "Ancient records tell what Mankton has already survived. On the other world he lay for months buried in molten lava when his temple became overwhelmed by volcanic eruption; when being moved to a new home by means of a gigantic engine he fell from a mountainside. Yet they think that with their feeble, flesh-and-blood hands——"

Then something happened which produced indescribable consternation and dramatically changed the temper of the mob for a second time. Unprompted, bubbles began to rise inside the bowl! Had the plinth suddenly become red hot the howling, tugging men could not have let go more quickly.

All of them slowly retreated in horror—some staring with eyes that held an awful, hypnotic fear, others crouched and throwing arms before their contorted faces.

Swirling, rushing eddies showed in the transparent liquid, gathering strength until within fifteen seconds it was as though a tempest of indignation raged in the oracle's being.

Then Mankton spoke! "Mark well this day, O' people!" The words sounded over the heads of that petrified mob like a voice of doom. They weren't the only persons to be frightened, either. I know I felt a cold, fluttering sensation in the pit of my stomach and over the suit's inter-com I could

hear Hartnell and Tubby breathing quick and shallow.

“Mark well this day, for it is now I bring news of the Great Ones! Swiftly they approach across the limitless firmament! When they arrive in their huge ships I, their servant Mankton, will make report!”

The gasp of penitence and fear sighed gustily across that great roof.

“Think well, O people, whether all commands have been faithfully obeyed. Search thy consciences and remedy omissions quickly. The Great Ones will soon return among thee. What will their vengeance be if thou hast in any way failed them?”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Frankly, I didn't know what to make of it at all. Hartnell, we learned later, had some idea but at the time it was pretty hazy.

Quickest to recover was Krang. In a voice that halted the crowd's headlong flight from the temple, he bellowed, "See, O people, in what predicament lack of faith has placed you! Act now to appease the Great Ones by ridding from among you those whom Mankton has condemned!"

I glanced round towards the nearest exit. Too many people stood between ourselves and the archway to make escape possible now, especially as the crowd's eyes followed the direction of Krang's malevolent scowl.

Zemanos was completely panic-stricken. No doubt a guilty conscience speeded his collapse.

Anger previously displayed against the oracle became diverted to us. A threatening murmur spread rapidly and the inhabitants made no secret of their loathing.

"The strangers must die!" declared Krang, flatly. "So, too, must Zemanos, his daughter and Laradno! It is the only way to avert the vengeance of the Great Ones!"

"Kill! Kill!" The chant mounted in terrifying crescendo. They sought to save themselves by shedding our blood—to forget their fear in the dreadful spectacle of executions.

"We've got to stop this!" said Hartnell, urgently. "We can't afford to let 'em get out of hand again."

"What can we do?" I asked, helplessly.

"I don't know, either," said Tubby. "But for the sake of Sirius let's do something!"

Turning up outside amplifier volume, I addressed the crowd again. They weren't particularly keen on listening, but they had no choice.

"Mankton has gone mad, O people of Fellik! That much was proved to you! Do you believe the crazy threatening of an insane oracle? Do you really believe the Great Ones are returning?"

Krang tried to crush the tiny seed of doubt I was intent upon planting in their minds. "Yes!" he screamed. "Mankton has pronounced it!"

"Mankton also suggested that three men should eat of a piece of stone," I replied, coldly.

Murmurs from the crowd revealed that I had succeeded in making the point.

"A mistake—it must have been a mistake!"

I'd got him! But would argument make any impression upon a terrified throng intent upon saving their skins?

"Hear, O people! Krang admits that Mankton makes mistakes! Of what use is an oracle which commits error?" I laughed scornfully, although in the tension of the moment it came to my own ears very much like a hesitant croak. "Perhaps Mankton was even mistaken about the Great Ones returning!"

"The stranger speaks truth!" cried Jereta. A good girl, with excellent presence of mind! I was thoroughly thankful to share the burden of holding the crowd's attention and they listened to her well, trying to grope for comfort through the fog of misgiving that swirled in their consciousness. Briefly, I translated for benefit of Tubby and Hartnell.

Trying to snatch back control of the situation, Krang committed his second miscalculation. At a sign, two of his men seized Jereta and placed hands over her mouth.

Instantly, young Hartnell moved forward inside the first golden circle, picked up one of the loose stones still lying about and repeated the single, clumsy sentence he knew,

holding the piece of rock invitingly towards Mankton. "Urh'h yakka n'kong lah."

The expectant silence might have been sliced with a knife.

Then the bubbles rose and the voice came: "Let three men only eat of it. If they live it is good for all. If they die none shall eat of it again."

At the back of the temple somebody giggled.

Krang's face was a caricature of baffled spite.

"Know all people," I said, "that in our greater wisdom we have exposed Mankton for a sham and a deception. Who shall now believe his empty threats? Who shall urge a return to barbarous customs where men are deliberately slaughtered?"

Zemanos perked up a bit when he saw which way matters were going and started upon a longwinded homily saying how everybody had been misled but now the lesson had been learned let events of the last hour or so be forgiven and forgotten.

While he was busy with this, I switched off the outside amplifier and asked on the inter-com, "Look here, young Hartnell, don't you think it's time you told us what this is all about?"

He grinned. "You ought to have guessed before now, Pop. As a matter of fact, Mankton's no more an oracle than I am! He's an automatic question-and-answer propaganda machine!"

"For the Great Ones, I suppose?" said Tubby.

Hartnell's face grew tense and ominous. "Yes. And I don't mind admitting I'm not particularly enamoured about the idea of meeting the sort of beings capable of building a thing like Mankton. There are principles used in that oracle that none of our scientists has ever dreamed of applying mechanically." He paused. "We're not out of the wood with this crowd yet. I'm going to get busy on 'em! You'd better get ready for a spot of translation, Pop!"

For fifteen minutes he held that crowd spell-bound with a

lecture upon the shortcomings of Mankton which was compelling by its simple illustration and deduction, winding up with a suggestion that took my breath away. This was simply to stage a demonstration against the oracle and see—in Hartnell's own words—"if he played the same record again."

The idea of dallying with such an elaborate toy, plus a distinct spice of danger, seemed to tickle the mob's fancy.

Krang started screaming "Blasphemy! Blasphemy!" but they shut him up and shoved him aside.

"Shall we throw stones?" asked one enthusiast.

"Tell him it isn't necessary!" said Hartnell, hastily. "A stray shot might come our way!"

Their first efforts were too much like prancing round in a childish, "ring-o'-roses" game to have any effect.

"Grieving galaxies!" exclaimed Hartnell. "Can't they understand Mankton senses atmosphere? Tell 'em to whip up some good, old-fashioned hate!"

It was no good, of course. No bubbles commenced to rise and Krang managed to hold their attention with a speech which contained a great deal of gloating. Before we could stop him he hit upon a point which shook the populace considerably. "The interlopers say Mankton is a machine," he rasped. "Very well! Let us admit he is an engine, designed and manufactured—by whom? Is it denied that the Great Ones conveyed him to the other world eons ago? Did they not make this oracle? Machine or not, Mankton is their servant! May they not at any time return to collect him?"

The crowd's shocked recognition of this argument plainly demonstrated that all our good work was in vain. Murmuring began again—hostile murmuring born of fear and heightened by the fact that we had forced them into acts of sacrilege for which they might be held accountable.

Then Krang, a vicious light of satisfaction gleaming in his fierce, pale eyes, clinched matters. "Who shall we believe? These strangers—or an oracle of the Great Ones?" Growls of agreement rumbled unpleasantly through the assembly.

"Therefore, people of Fellik, I say this: that the strangers shall prove themselves greater than Mankton by destroying him within the next hour—or they themselves shall be destroyed in ceremonial execution!"

"What could be fairer than that?" asked Hartnell, when I translated the gist of these remarks.

Tubby sighed with resignation. "Well, we did our best, anyway."

The mob greeted Krang's suggestion with more animation. Too late they produced those strong, genuine emanations of hostility which Hartnell had tried in vain to cultivate more or less artificially.

Zemanos beamed and stroked his beard. "Now, O Wise Ones, will you be able to demonstrate your powers, as I have always wished."

With shining eyes, Jereta turned to me and said, "You will do this? You will be the means of ending Mankton's evil reign over our people?"

What could I say? Fortunately, her father stepped forward once more to address the crowd. These councillors on Fellik were great ones for talking.

"Listen, O people!" called the old chief. "Know all men that I and my followers ally ourselves with the travellers from the skies! I must tell you that in our wisdom I and certain other councillors have long sought some method of freeing Fellik from this oracle's unholy tyranny——" The murmurs began rumbling again, but with different intonation. "At last help has come to us across the centuries from the old world. If the strangers fail, I and my daughter and my friends will gladly die with them! But they will not fail! Within the hour shall Mankton be no more!"

His confidence proved infectious among the mob. Personally, I considered him over-optimistic.

An odd stone, sailing over the heads of foremost ranks, set the oracle's great bowl ringing again and signalled a new outbreak of jeers and booing.

"Let us help the strangers!" cried Laradno, brushing aside the scowling Krang. "It is our privilege to overthrow Mankton if we can!"

He ran forward, joined by many others and once more began tugging at the heavy stone plinth. He was a willing boy, but not very bright.

No need to re-emphasise the rapidly changing temper of that waxen-faced, white-robed throng. Written in graph-form it would have resembled a fever patient's temperature chart. There were two main peaks—first when initial resentment against Mankton flared up; the second when—

It was like witnessing a three-dimensional moving picture that one had seen before. Bubbles started rising again in the bowl, quelling the surging, howling demonstrators inside the golden circles. Then the oracle spoke.

"Mark well this day, O people!" boomed Mankton. "Mark well this day, for it is now I bring news of the Great Ones. Swiftly they approach across the limitless firmament——"

"The second warning!" screeched Krang, dancing about and gnashing his teeth. "Cease this madness! Cease, I say!"

The crowd took no notice; they were busy mockingly repeating the oracle's words in unison with him. A section of them diverted their minds from this pastime when a small procession of Krang's supporters passed through, bearing something upon a cushion.

As the little group grew nearer I saw the object to be a great, barbarous-looking scimitar, fully five feet long, fashioned from some gold-coloured metal and highly polished. The thing was of terrifying aspect, with a grip sufficiently large for it to be wielded with both hands. It looked horribly sharp.

All in the vicinity recoiled except Krang, who allowed the sword to be delicately laid at his feet and gazed down upon it with marked anticipation.

"This is unforgivable!" declared Zemanos, grimly. "An assistant-in-council has no authority to disturb this ceremonial relic!"

"Services of the Sword of Justice, for so long hidden away, will soon be needed!" retorted Krang. "Moreover, in thy absence as a prisoner and defiler of our holy oracle, there remains none but me to bring it from the secret place."

"I am no prisoner yet!"

"Also, we have yet to see whether there remains strength in thy ancient arms sufficient to raise the sword and sever these strangers' ill-shaped and armoured heads from their puny bodies! Remember that is part of the bargain!"

For a moment I thought Zemanos might jump on him—I certainly felt like doing so myself—but the old man restrained his anger nobly and moved with us towards the exit, where he turned and announced, "O people, the beneficent strangers need a little while in which to prepare. In half-an-hour will they return to the temple, when all shall be present to witness their wondrous demonstration."

Krang smiled nastily. "Mankton's people will no doubt fret in anticipation. I shall restrain my own impatience without difficulty."

## CHAPTER NINE

We were back once more in the bare little chamber, the door this time securely fastened and guards on duty to prevent our leaving. I didn't know where they'd taken Zemanos, Jereta and Laradno.

"Half-an-hour," said Hartnell, striding up and down in thought. "The old chap doesn't know what he's done for us!"

"Having other things to think about at the time," said Tubby, who was sitting comfortably with his back against the wall and his helmet open, "I didn't get more than the drift of what you told 'em about Mankton. A question-and-answer machine, eh? Did you learn that with your peculiar experiments?"

Hartnell nodded.

"Run over it again," I suggested. "Something may suggest itself for wrecking the thing."

"Well, you notice Mankton never uses the word "Fellik" or any other particular location. Nor does he mention any person by name."

Although feeling far from happy, I grinned. "We always refer to Mankton as 'him,' don't we?"

"You won't deny he's got personality, Pop, even by human standards."

"I certainly wouldn't! Sorry I interrupted. Go on."

"We heard from old Zemanos how the oracle arrived. Mankton himself confirmed this, when he said the Great



Ones go about setting similar machines on various likely planets to collect information——”

“How’d you like to play the full record over?” inquired Tubby. “Mankton’s been receiving stuff for about two million years!”

I don’t think I’d ever seen young Hartnell more subdued. “Meeting the Great Ones is the last thing I want to do!” he admitted, fervently. “They’re not only capable of building a machine like Mankton, but they mass-produce ’em, too! And think how everybody hears the replies in their own language. That brings in a principle we’ve never even dreamed of!”

“Well, how’s it done?”

He shrugged. “Frankly, I don’t know. It’s obviously some ingenious elaboration along the lines of Tormann’s dictation machine, where sound-impulsés are converted into written characters. Don’t forget, either, that the Great Ones know immeasurably more about the physics of sound than we’ve even imagined. That broadcasting system, for instance—with nothing to it except those queer, black funnels.”

Hartnell walked up and down again in silence for a little time. “Mankton—and all the others like him—squat in their appointed places through eons of time, not only listening but maintaining civilisations in frames of mind pleasing to the Great Ones. Mankton was welcomed into a civilisation already fairly advanced and the golden listening boundaries were installed very neatly on Earth and removed here intact. But on other worlds other Manktons may merely have been left for inhabitants to find when they emerged from the primeval ooze. All the information is ready to help an infant race—even a ready-made answer for primitive tribes who ask their god whether a particular fruit is good to eat.”

Tubby chuckled. “Manktons can’t see! I wonder if the Great Ones have found that awkward in other places?”

“Remember how the oracle senses atmosphere? He booms

out impressively to overawe ignorant races. You can imagine that my poor effort with the Erriksen Vocabulary might well have led him to believe he was dealing with a tribe just learning to speak. But give him a more advanced version of the same question—and back comes a scientific answer in a reasonable tone of voice. There must be some method of shuttling the records back and forth in accordance with spoken queries. He doesn't always answer, either. Zemanos told us that, and when I ceremonially introduced ourselves he also stayed quiet—because there just wasn't any answer. I suppose the Great Ones could have included a 'pleased to meet you' phrase or so, but probably they're above such pleasantries."

We mulled this over.

"Think, too, how Mankton is self-powered—with sufficient to last more than two million years. That glass bowl may be fairly large, but you wouldn't think it big enough to hold all that energy, would you?"

"There's still a lot left," I remarked, sombrely. "Drobno and those others found it out!"

"Atmosphere," muttered Tubby, puzzled. "I don't understand it at all!"

Hartrell waved a hand and continued his expatiation. "Auras, vibrations—call them what you will—are always present. We can often perceive the emotions of people in a room before a word is spoken and before we look at a single face. I suppose Mankton's apparatus includes some sort of receiving gadget for emanations like these and the thing triggers off the appropriate record." He lowered his voice. "That's the really weak spot—Mankton can do everything except think and see! Consequently he can't distinguish between truth and lies!"

His words struck a chord of recollection. I remembered remarking previously that only in Man rested the ability to voice deliberate falsehood. Was this beyond the imagination

even of the Great Ones? Was it that they could conceive no circumstances in which it would be undesirable for Mankton to give anything except a straight answer to a straight question?

"Emanations," continued young Hartnell. "That's why things happen to people who attack the oracle, but those with innocent intentions can touch it safely. When matters begin to get really warm Mankton plays his last card. He pretends the Great Ones are on their way back."

"But that's a lie!" I said, in surprise.

"Is it?"

I stared at him for a moment. "Oh," I said, understanding. "Nevertheless, it would have been a lie earlier, because that particular record was obviously included in Mankton's repertoire even before they'd found a place to plant him."

"It's all a matter of degree, Pop. The Great Ones might certainly be on their way back right now—but considering how far out they've travelled it might take another couple of million years before they arrive. On the other hand, perhaps a simple deception like that is considered the acme of trickery as far as they're concerned."

"Normally, I suppose, one playing of that particular record would be enough to keep people quiet for years, until it's all forgotten. It was sheer bad luck that Mankton had to run it over twice in succession."

Tubby had something else on his mind. "Look here, what happens when Mankton and his brother-machines get found out? After all, we've advanced far enough to spot 'em for what they are—why shouldn't others?"

"There's a certain point," said Hartnell, "at which the oracles must realise the level of intelligence possessed by creatures consulting them. Everything is pre-arranged as far as possible. Think back, for instance, about the way Mankton dealt with us."

"First of all," I objected, "he knew we weren't Great

Ones, even though old Zemanos introduced us as such. I thought you said he couldn't see."

"Emanations again. Gadgets could be set to a particular frequency, as it were, and trigger off a record only when his genuine masters stood before him. Meantime, the Great Ones guarded against impersonation by fixing a circuit which, when the aura doesn't coincide with what the oracle hears, causes a denial to be spoken. Then, again, Mankton undoubtedly contains some sort of automatic filing system. Is it so impossible to arrange that when questions of a fair standard of intelligence are asked another circuit condemns the consultant to banishment? Or, if the standard indicates possible awkwardness for the Great Ones, the oracle demands death? Remember how excited Mankton became when I mentioned space travel? That, to him, meant danger. Altogether, the Great Ones took all the precautions they could—and, though I hate to say so, did a fine job. As for others discovering Mankton's limitations, think how headquarters have been seeking proper civilisations for centuries—and never a single sign! No, on the whole I think Man has done pretty well for himself in his own part of space. What's happening far out on other galaxies I don't know—and I don't think it'll bother us for a good many thousands of years."

"By which time," said Tubby, reflectively, "Man will have developed even farther—maybe even to the extent of handling the Great Ones."

I decided to put a stop to this mutual back-slapping. As members of Inter-X we had other duties beside academic speculation. "Look," I said, "it's obvious we can't think of any way to destroy Mankton with the means at our disposal. We ought to report to headquarters, anyway. I'll see if they've got any ideas."

Young Hartnell sniffed in derogatory manner. "Fat lot of help they'll be. Anyway, better call 'em, Pop. It'll be an

education to hear their reaction when you tell 'em about the Great Ones!"

He was right, but time was running short and I didn't feel like enjoying the situation. I compressed what we had learned into as concise a summary as possible. As we had anticipated, the controller was even more shaken than when learning about human beings existing on Fellik.

"Keep listening!" he ordered, curtly. Leading scientific advisers were obviously being summoned hurriedly to the control room.

Process of cross-examination followed previous lines. Hartnell and Tubby were called to give testimony in person this time, though. Apparently this business of the Great Ones was too fantastic to accept on uncorroborated stories.

Ordered to wait, we fidgeted uneasily. I looked at my watch every few seconds.

"Tell 'em to hurry up, Pop!" whispered Hartnell, urgently.

"How can I?"

"This," said Tubby, "is no time for standing on ceremony—even with controllers!"

"Look here— Quiet! He's coming on now!"

"The Advisory Panel takes the gravest possible view," announced the ship, in suitably-solemn tones. "This oracle must be destroyed at all costs. When the——"

I committed what must on ordinary occasions be considered an unforgiveable sin. I interrupted. "All costs?"

The controller paused. Someone was muttering instructions in the background. "All costs short of taking human life," he amended.

"That rules out our only line of action," I said. "If we receive permission to resist Krang and his supporters, Zemanos and his faction will allow us to wreck the machine at leisure."

More muttering.

"You are authorised to resist by all means save those

involving loss of human life. The Advisory Panel gravely fears that this mechanism incorporates direction-finding apparatus which may be used by its constructors in their space flights."

They were certainly worried. Never before had I known control sufficiently informal to produce reasons; expeditions invariably received only orders.

"You will appreciate that desire to study this unique machine is overwhelmed by the necessity of putting it out of action immediately. Expedition panels, however, cannot grant authority to kill. Such prerogative lies only in headquarters' power."

Hartnell swore and banged his fist against the wall. "Blazing Betelguese! Must we always be smothered in tangles of red tape?"

I felt exactly the same, keeping my voice under control only by special effort. "This detachment," I said, "would be grateful for suggestions—in view of the fact that the oracle electrocutes persons making contact with the intention of damaging it."

The controller kindly overlooked this sarcasm. "We are ready to rush explosives from the ship. They could arrive in fifty minutes. Would the arrival of a further party increase hostility among the opposing faction?"

"In precisely thirty-five minutes we shall be executed—unless we destroy the oracle by some other means in less than that time. The only instrument at our disposal is a speed-gamma."

"In case you fail and are eliminated, can you suggest any method whereby a second exploration party might achieve the object?"

I knew by the way he spoke that our careers neared their end. Often in reflection I had dreaded this moment; now it had come I felt quite calm and resigned.

"If we fail," I said, "the pro-Mankton party takes control

of Fellik. Any subsequent attempt to reach the oracle would provoke hostilities."

"Wait!" he said again.

Hartnell, making infuriated gestures, said bitterly, "Maybe they'll ask us to tell Mankton three funny stories simultaneously in the hope that he splits his sides!"

"Control here! Please consider whether the receiving mechanism might be jammed by several questions voiced at once."

"There you are!" shouted Hartnell. "What did I tell you?"

Tubby pulled him away and I recalled for the controller's benefit how a shouting, milling crowd surging round the plinth inside the golden circles had failed to disturb the oracle. I mentioned, too, Mankton's sojourn in molten lava and his fall down the mountainside. "Weight of the machine is estimated at anything between twenty and eighty tons."

"If speed-gammas are employed," warned the ship, "they must be used with care."

"We do not know," I said, "whether the oracle contains any organic substance."

For the benefit of those unacquainted with speed-gamma pistols, I might say here that these weapons utilise the exceptionally penetrating rays from vacuum discharge tubes. The deadly effect upon unprotected tissue was known as far back as the early twentieth century, but later scientists have found means of speeding up the disintegrating effect, so that within half-a-second of pressing the trigger any animal in the line of direction collapses into a mass of putrefying flesh.

"Wait."

"It's all very well for him to keep saying that," complained Tubby, "but any minute now there'll come a knock on the door and——"

I could imagine the frantic consultations proceeding back

at the ship. I doubt if our news about the Great Ones could have produced any less consternation among that gathering of highly-placed savants than if a Hakanawicz-mutated centipede had suddenly wriggled across the table towards them. Urgent warning messages must by now be speeding their way across space, spreading tidings that somewhere out in the shimmering galaxies creatures of astounding intelligence were engaged upon journeys of a magnitude beyond our understanding. Man's own achievement of travelling roughly thirty light years from Mother Earth paled to insignificance before the thought that these Great Ones had mastered the secret of penetrating untold depths of the universe. Indeed, while radio constituted our fastest means of communication—equalling the speed of light—it would need more than thirty years before news would reach Earth itself.

Yet Mankton had said the Great Ones came from somewhere beyond the great spiral nebula of Andromeda—900,000 light-years distant!

Centuries ago a great mathematician named Einstein produced a formula stating that no element could travel faster than the speed of light—186,000 miles a second. Nothing has yet been devised to disprove this. Theoretically, our ships could achieve this speed, once free from a world's atmosphere. Practical flight provides objections. Biggest obstacles are particles of cosmic dust and tiny grains of debris floating in space.

I'm no physicist; Hartnell understands things like that. I asked him once to work out a simple formula for me, based on the process of kinetic energy. Let a grain of sand weighing only one-thousandth of a gram hit a stationary ship and no damage is done, but the picture alters considerably at useful flying speeds. At 8,000 miles per second that grain of sand strikes with a force of 15 tons; at 16,000 miles a second it becomes 37 tons and at 32,000 miles a second no less than 250 tons. These speeds don't, compare very favourably with light's 186,000 miles a second, do they?



Electronic dissipators deal with small stuff in our modern ships, while radar controls automatically alter course after detecting large objects. Trouble is that when travelling near the speed of light even radar waves wouldn't see such objects quickly enough to avoid them, while specks of dust acquire a striking power violent enough to wreck the largest vessel.

Those are our problems today—and no wonder the navigating crews won't go faster than about 26,000 miles a second. How long did it take the Great Ones to reach Earth from beyond Andromeda, even if they'd found some means of travelling at the speed of light? My guess would be well over a couple of million years. Apart from that, I don't like to think about the subject any more.

A knock came at the door. It slid open and there was Krang, grinning all over his ugly face.

## CHAPTER TEN

The temple buzzed with the same high anticipation that must have reigned during barbarous gladiatorial circuses of ancient times. Each individual comprising those serried ranks contributed his quota of expectation. A sacrifice was about to be offered before the eyes of all present. It might be the great image, Mankton, or, should the Great Ones' emissary prove stronger, three strangers who had so mysteriously appeared on Fellik, their features hidden in glass-fronted helmets and their bodies covered by peculiar clothes that completely covered arms and legs.

How the others felt I don't know, but the sight of that great, shining Sword of Justice—what a wealth of mockery in its description!—now hanging suspended in full view by fine chains anchored to the temple roof made my stomach knot itself into a cold, hard ball. A little piece of Krang psychology, no doubt, and very successful, too. I noticed Tubby staring at the thing with horrified fascination.

Hemmed in by guards, we moved in slow procession towards the place where Mankton rested. I didn't feel much like giving the running commentary the controller had ordered, even though I called to mind how the recording being made at the ship might be played over for the wonderment of generations yet to come. Recording gear had also been switched on, of course, for our original report on Mankton. When the controller first comes across with his "Wait!" it's usually for a brief consultation to consider whether a report is worth taking up room in the mes. Formerly, everything sent back by radio from landing parties

used to be recorded, but headquarters began to find time taken up by such a torrent of trivialities that they decided to preserve originals only of worthwhile consultations. The Mankton episode possessed every possibility of becoming a classic. I hoped all of us might have the opportunity some time to hear the thing played.

We halted at last, once more gazing up at the oracle. The crowd had been kept well distant. Even though Fellik, so far as I knew, possessed no knowledge of explosives, I received the impression they somehow realised the possibility of Mankton blowing up. It was a risk we had to take, too.

Standing there with Zemanos, Jereta and Laradno, young Hartnell asked dispiritedly, "Well, what do we try first?"

Krang was in his element as Master of Ceremonies, with a marked bias against us. "See now, O people, how mighty Mankton will resist those who pit their puny strength against him!" He bowed mockingly, as though to say, "The floor is yours—get on with it!"

Jereta looked across our little semi-circle, eyes bright with confidence, while old Zemanos stroked his beard and purred, awaiting the moment of his revenge.

"We're loosing off with the speed-gamma," I told the controller. I didn't see the need for continuing the formal, stiff-and-starchy phraseology we were expected to employ in reports. If we failed they wouldn't be able to reprimand us; if we somehow succeeded, the powers-that-be would certainly prove sufficiently gratified to overlook minor infringements of procedure.

Carefully ensuring that no living creature lay in the diagonal, upward line of fire, Hartnell aimed the speed-gamma. It is not a very bulky weapon. A discharge tube about thirteen inches long forms the barrel, with most of the electrical mechanism enclosed in the grip. Various trimmings and sighting arrangements decorate the thing rather elaborately, but the basic parts remain comparatively simple.

Everyone held their breath when Hartnell stepped forward and levelled the pistol at the huge bowl. He fired three times—first from outside the golden circles, next from between the shining lines, thirdly at point blank range. The discharges, of course, were silent and invisible.

Nothing, apparently, had happened. Those loathsome, interlocked white rods remained undisturbed; not a single bubble rose sluggishly to the surface in protest.

"Well," said Hartnell, helplessly. "Now we know Mankton's not organic! So what?"

"That bowl," said Tubby, "couldn't possibly insulate gamma rays?"

"I don't think so. But we've always got to remember that we're up against unknown quantities in a lot of ways."

None of the Fellik crowd knew what was happening. Only Krang, watching through eyes slitted beneath craggy brows, guessed that an attempt had been made.

"Come, O strangers! Try again! Can it be that Mankton defies your efforts?"

Horror and disappointment dawned slowly on Zemanos's features. "Is this true, O Wise Ones? You have failed?"

"Patience," I said. "Our magic is invisible. We must see if the oracle still possesses power of speech."

Hartnell moved again within the listening area.

"You could try one of those questions he doesn't answer," suggested Tubby. "That might make 'em think you've worked the trick!"

"Krang would soon call that bluff!" said Hartnell. "Besides, don't forget we're under double orders to smash this thing. Don't let's skimp the job!"

He confronted the oracle again and, amid creepy, hair-raising silence, said his little piece. "Urh'h yakka n'kong lah."

I held my breath.

"Let three men only eat of it," boomed Mankton.  
"If——"

The remainder of his reply was drowned by a great, menacing sigh from the assembly.

"No soap," I told the controller.

"Say again!" he replied, in strict accordance with routine. Maybe he was worried in case they blamed him personally for allowing colloquial phrases to creep into official records. He could have it the impersonal way if he wanted.

"Speed-gamma pistols ineffective against oracle," I reported. "Populace becoming increasingly hostile."

"It is suggested here that the machine might fail to operate without the electrolite——"

"I suppose he means that sloshy, transparent liquid," put in Tubby, unnecessarily.

"If a method could be devised to upset the machine's equilibrium——"

"The construction most likely exceeds fifty tons," I said, coldly. "We have only twenty minutes to arrange necessary lifting mechanism and supports."

"What action do you propose to take?"

"I'm damned if I know!" Away with formality! If I ever got back to the ship I wouldn't care what they did to me.

"Run like Aldebaran—if we get a chance!" suggested young Hartnell.

The expression of disappointment on Jereta's face was heartbreaking to observe.

Krang, on the other hand, positively crowed with triumph. "They have failed, O people of Fellik! The strangers are powerless against the invincible strength of Mankton!" His eyes flashed with lust for blood and domination. Both were within his grasp. "Now lower the great Sword of Justice

and let us see Zemanos make their heads roll in humility before our mighty oracle!"

"Stop!" I shouted, in sudden inspiration. "Stop! Sixteen minutes yet remain. We have by no means exhausted our resources yet!"

He sneered in my face; but for the protecting visor he might also have spat in it. "Very well—take thy precious sixteen minutes of life, O interloper! But remember that in the same second that the time expires—so also do thee and thy friends!"

"Got an idea, Pop?" asked Tubby, eagerly.

"It might work—I don't know! Get your suits off—quickly! If we hitch all three to one of those pillars and turn the gravity-reactors full on——!"

"Not enough!" snapped Hartnell. "But maybe a bit of manhandling in addition might upset the centre of gravity!"

I didn't feel very happy about approaching the plinth. I stretched up to grip one of the four supporting columns, feeling the smooth stone under my hand as cold and slithery as a snake. The internal suit straps slid snugly between the carved convolutions, where I cinched them tight. Scarcely a foot from my face—an even shorter distance from my hand—curved the crystal bowl. Close-up view of the motionless, white worms it contained made nausea rise hot and bitter in my throat. Twice my hand almost brushed the deadly crystal as I pulled the straps into position, arranging them so that the thrust dragged diagonally against the pillar.

"Don't bother about the plinth!" yelled Hartnell. "If we could break off one of these columns the bowl might collapse. Borrow some robes! Use your uniforms! Twist 'em into ropes—and pull!"

After the speed-gamma fiasco, few were willing to help. Finally we persuaded about thirty bystanders to haul on the improvised cables, tugging in the same direction as the suits.

Manipulating the gravity-reactor controls proved a ticklish

business. I wasn't anxious to lose a couple of fingers when the suits flung themselves skywards. Having improvised an extension device with a piece of wire, I prodded the adjustment pointer quickly to the left. The entire suit snapped viciously past my nose and remained straining against the pillar so strongly that the straps creaked.

The mob stared open-mouthed at the suits, eventually lowering their gaze to see ourselves and the gallant band of helpers playing a grim tug-o'-war with Mankton.

The pillar refused to budge. Krang and his crowd began to guffaw nastily. They only stopped when one suit broke loose and rocketed into the upper darkness. It struck somewhere in the roof with a thud that shook the entire temple, and, of course, remained there.

We had eight minutes left. I glanced at my watch and broke into a cold sweat. We stood looking helplessly at one another. Jereta bowed her head and began to weep, silent shudders continually racking her body.

"Do the strangers desire to employ the remaining seven minutes in further vain efforts?" inquired Krang, with silky sarcasm. His wide mouth stretched in a mirthless grin. I hope never again to see such horrible, naked emotions scrawled across a human countenance.

Not knowing what else to do, I walked across to reclaim my suit. I looked up at Mankton and said aloud, "We may end our lives here at your comand, you overgrown wineglass, but your masters will never triumph. After us will come others, and after them still more, until at length our race finds a way to destroy your evil influence."

The oracle made no reply. Apparently he was not wired to answer vulgar abuse.

"Enough" screamed Krang. "Take them away! None may say we are not merciful! They shall be allowed the remaining five minutes for contemplating their dreadful sin and praying to whatever gods they worship."

Because I was nearest, they grabbed me first. I heard Zemanos and Jereta protesting violently, with Hartnell adding his voice to the uproar even though none could understand. I remember thinking how he probably regretted learning none of the language except a question about fruit.

Then I was dragged out of the temple, letting my newly-reclaimed atmosphere suit fall to the ground, and locked up again in the bare little chamber I now knew so well.

I sat in a corner and reflected upon various matters which need not concern us now, wishing I had some means of knowing what was happening outside. Perhaps the Sword of Justice had already been taken down and now, in Zemanos's trembling hands, was raised over the kneeling form of Jereta—or Hartnell—or Tubby. Frankly, I didn't mind so much for myself. My years have been moderately long and fairly usefully employed. It was a pity that young people, with the run of life opening out before them, should come to such premature ends.

Then from the direction of the temple echoed a wailing scream, so loud, prolonged and poignant that my hair stood on end.

I looked at my watch. It needed less than a minute before the half-hour expired. Krang had started his beastly work early. Who had screamed? What unspeakable torture could wring a sound like that from a human throat?

It came again—louder and more prolonged. I sat down suddenly on the floor and rested my moist face in my palms. The needle on my watch swung past the mark. Nothing mattered now.

I heard in the distance a prodigious uproar. The mob was cheering as the first head rolled on the smooth stone of the temple floor, severed by the keen edge of that great, golden sword. Whose head? Jereta's? Tubby's? Hartnell's?

With sudden, irresistible impulse, I ran across to the doors and battered on them until blood from my broken knuckles



stained their creamy ornamentation.

And while I stood there hammering in frenzy the barrier suddenly slid open. I raised a fist to strike down the figure confronting me.

“Well, well!” said young Hartnell. “Nice of you to stage an indignation meeting, Pop, even if there’s no one here to see it!”

He threw back his head and laughed with inexpressible relief.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mankton, the oracle from beyond Andromeda, was no more. I followed Hartnell back to the temple, where the throng had almost gone mad with enthusiasm, cheering Zemanos, Jereta and ourselves until the high arches vibrated with deafening echoes. Around the plinth, covering the area enclosed by the golden circles, lay spatters of unmentionable debris in a pool of filthy liquid, no longer clearly transparent but black and clotted, smelling worse than mud from a borass-swamp on Karma. Amid the mess were scattered jagged splinters of crystal. I also noticed something that was unmistakably human blood.

"My suit!" I exclaimed, when it seemed that sanity returned. "Where's my suit? Must talk to the controller!"

"Here, Pop," said Tubby. "Hartnell's been wearing it, but I don't think he's contaminated the thing too badly! His own's up in the roof somewhere!"

"Did you tell the ship what's happened?"

Hartnell shook his head. "What sort of pals do you think we are? You've done the dirty work all along—why should we pinch the glory of the climax?"

I struggled into the suit again and switched on emergency frequency.

"What happened?" demanded the controller, eagerly.

In most crisp and formal tones I said we were obliged through hostile demonstrations to suspend communication.

"I know all about that," he answered, surprisingly human for a change. Apparently this conversation was not being

recorded. "You left the transmitter switched on for a time."

This must have been up to the moment I unbuckled the suit, almost weeping with vexation, from Mankton's pillar. Probably the switch became shut off when they grabbed me and I had to let the suit fall.

"The oracle has been destroyed in accordance with instructions," I said, very businesslike. "Fellik is now under control of existing regime, headed by Zemanos, whose attitude is friendly."

"Explain method by which the machine was disintegrated."

I knew by the change of voice that the recorders were on again. The method? It suddenly struck me that I hadn't the faintest idea! A technical hitch in the transmitter was called for. I switched off hurriedly.

Hearing his name mentioned, old Zemanos came forward, beaming delightedly, with Jereta clinging to his arm. "Our thanks to you, O strangers who are strangers no more. Now will the people of Fellik live in peace until eternity."

"All shall call blessings on thy names," said the girl, profoundly. "It shall be known through the generations that thy wisdom opened to them the secrets contained in the ancient books—the secrets of freedom which are the right and destiny of all nations!"

Overwhelmed—feeling simultaneously honoured and embarrassed—I produced the Morbach carrier, which I handed over complete with contents. "Here are the records. Guard them well, for who knows what other treasures of truth they may contain?"

"It will be done!" vowed Zemanos. "These books shall rest in a fitting shrine, built on the spot where Mankton stood for so long. No more shall strange carvings engender fear in the minds of those who approach, but the truth shall be available for all men at all times."

For a moment it looked as though Hartnell intended to

slap him on the back approvingly. Personally, I felt near to tears of gratification.

I bade farewell to Jereta, leaving her gazing fondly into Laradno's countenance. I felt he would make her a devoted, if rather unimaginative husband.

We moved to the exit with admiring cheers ringing in our ears, escorted by Zemanos, who insisted upon offering refreshment before we left.

"Look here, young Hartnell," I said, when we once more reclined in the old chief's house before a table laden with golden drinking bowls and dishes of fruit, "how did you finally break Mankton?"

He chuckled. "You ought to know, Pop. You gave me the ideal!"

"I did?"

"When you lost your temper and called Mankton, with such poetic invective, an overgrown wineglass. I suddenly remembered all I'd learned about resonating frequencies. In the museum at headquarters you can read about a little trick they had centuries ago. A singer with a particularly powerful voice could shatter wineglasses by striking a high note that corresponded with the vessel's resonance according to size and thickness of material. Stimulated by these harmonics, the glass vibrated so strongly that its substance couldn't stand the strain.

"So the oracle——?"

He nodded. "As everybody saw, Mankton was enclosed in a large crystal bowl. I remembered Jereta's violin-playing and the way you'd caused consternation several times by speaking from your suit with the outside amplifier full on."

He chuckled again. "We had a spot of trouble persuading Krang to let someone fetch the violin, but Zemanos bullied him into it at last. I yanked out the microphone on its extension cord and held it close while Jereta stroked the strings into a wild, rising howl. You know, Pop, you'd never credit the frightful row it made——"

"Don't worry!" I said grimly. "I heard it all right!"

"Did you? Oh. Well, believe it or not, I caught the resonance frequency first time. That confounded bowl acted just like an acoustic diaphragm. We ran up the scale a second time and held the pitch for a moment!"

He caught my glance and I read in his eyes recollection of an incredible horror. "Do you know, Pop, I'll swear that before he disintegrated Mankton actually screamed on the same note as the one that tore him apart!"

"The blood—" I said.

"Krang. He was standing close to the plinth. I don't know how much that bowl weighed, but when the bottom fell out it smashed him absolutely flat! He never even realised what hit him!"

"It is terrible to experience gladness at the death of a man," whispered Jereta, "yet so do I feel about Krang."

"Better that he died now, after showing himself to us in his true nature," said Zemanos, "than continue to work secretly as a traitor, intriguing against the people to gratify his lust for power. The Great Ones unconsciously gave Mankton more wisdom than they knew."

I thought once more—as, indeed, I did upon many succeeding days—about the fantastic creatures, beyond our powers to imagine, who had constructed the oracle. Were they truly in the act of returning across unplumbed depths of space towards our galaxy? Would they ever retrace the points in their gigantic orbit, collecting from many worlds the little idols they had left? Or had, perhaps, some fearful catastrophe overtaken them in the cosmic wilderness?

It was poor comfort, but at least I doubted if we should encounter them in our own brief lifetime.

## II

The ship sent a runabout vehicle, carrying a spare atmosphere suit for Hartnell, to take us back. The transporter's crew warned us that our story had sped all over the vessel

and captured everyone's imagination, but none of us anticipated the embarrassment of people cheering us from opened vision ports on the ship's shaded side.

At last we reached our cabin to find special messages of congratulation from the Advisory Panel lying in envelopes on our bunks.

Hartnell and I also had further communications. Mine coldly called attention to the necessity for observing strict procedure in language when making verbal reports to the ship, and warned that any repetition would involve severe disciplinary measures.

Hartnell's was even better. In view of the fact that an atmosphere suit had been lost by misuse—i.e., employment of the apparatus for purposes other than those for which it had been manufactured—the Equipment Department considered they could do no less than charge him with ten per cent. of the replacement cost.

He read this with popping eyes, then flopped back on his bunk and laughed till tears ran down his cheeks.

"You know, Pop," he said, at last, "I'd never work for anyone but Inter-X—even if they offered double the money!"

THE END

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## NEW BOY

As a reader, I am a relative newcomer to the field of science fiction, but I can tell you I'm here to stay. It's just what I've been looking for after reading about flying saucers in the Sunday papers — imaginative, accurate and, I think, educational. There is just one thing that bothers me. Not having read much of this sort of thing, I am unable to picture devices like visi-screens and electron guns. Could you manage to put in a few black and white drawings of them? I think that would make everything quite clear.

**R.G.L. (London, N.W.)**

*Welcome to the fraternity of SF fans. May your imagination grow stronger as the light-years pass! (Can you spot the deliberate mistake?). We've been thinking about using line drawings for some time and can't make up our minds. The best thing would be for other readers to help us out. Let's have lots of*

*letters telling us whether you want them or not. And that goes for any other feature you can think up. We can't start a feature for one reader alone — so get out those electronic typewriters . . .*



## A ROCKET

I didn't think your first two numbers were so hot. I felt they had too little science and too much fiction. However, I note your editorial says, "Be patient, it will take time before we are able to lift our stories far above the general rut, but at least we are earnestly striving that way."

With that thought in mind, please don't think I am being carpingly critical. I think it is about time someone gave us better science fiction, so good luck to you.

**ARTHUR GREENHALGH**

**(Halifax)**

continued over page



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Dear Sir,—Your remedy for removing the tobacco craving reached me on Tuesday last, and after only four days I am completely cured. I did not think it possible to remove the craving by any means, but being determined to give your remedy a fair trial I find that it does everything you claim and more besides. My nerves are better already, and I sleep better and feel far livelier than I did before. You may use this letter to your advantage if you wish and let me say "Thank you." Sincerely, R. Mooney, Bromley, Kent.

Dear Sir,—I am writing to thank you for the Victor Treatment. I have given it a fair trial. It is now six weeks since I have smoked, and I have never had a crave to smoke. I have told my friends about this great treatment, how it has proved satisfactory. Thanking you once again. E.J.B. Glasgow.

Sir,—Words cannot express my thanks for your wonderful cure from smoking. I was a heavy smoker of cigarettes for thirty years, but since taking your treatment I have no further use for smoking. I will certainly recommend it to all who wish to stop smoking. Alex. Vance.

P.S.—Please use this letter if you have a wish to do so.

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### NEVER WITHOUT MONEY

"I received one of your Histories about three weeks ago and it has brought me luck. Before I received your book I was always without money, but now, thanks to you, I am never without money! (Mrs.) G. O., Glos. 8.10.45."

### INCREASE IN WAGES

"... already after one fortnight we have had luck. I won ... sum of £30 ... also have got a £1 per week increase in wages unexpected so Joan the Wad must be our lucky Star. So please send Jack O'Lantern to make the pair complete. (Mrs.) D. M., Kirkgate, Leeds. 19.11.45."

### LOST HIS JOAN—LOST HIS LUCK

"Please let me know how much to send for Joan the Wad and Jack O'Lantern. I had them both in 1931, but somehow lost them in hospital two years ago. I can honestly say that since losing them nothing has seemed to go right with me. I know what good luck Joan can bring by honest facts I have really experienced ... I certainly know that Joan the Wad is more than a lucky charm. (Mr.) E. E. S., Liphook, Hants. 10.11.45."

### HOMELESS

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### MARRIED A MILLIONAIRE

"... two of my friends have won £500 each since receiving your mascots and another has married an American millionaire. ... Please forward me one Joan the Wad and one Jack O'Lantern. C. E., Levenshulme. 3.11.45."

### BETTER JOB, MORE MONEY, LESS HOURS, IMPROVED HEALTH

"My dear Joan ... She has brought me continual good luck and her influence spreads to every sphere ... I have got a much better job ... greater wages ... less working hours ... and my health has greatly improved. I have always been a lonely kind of person, but ... a friend of the opposite sex, she is also lonely ... great opportunity for comradeship offered. So you see how the influence of Joan works. My pockets have always been full and I have had many wishes and desires fulfilled ... I would not part with Joan for her weight in gold, she is much too valuable in every way. Her powers extend all over the world, and she works unceasingly for the full benefit of her friends and adherents. She rides in my pocket day and night and never leaves me. ... D. H., Leeds. 9. 2.11.45."

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**J. McGUFFY (Belfast)**

*Because we sold every copy printed. Sorry. Place a standing order with your newsagent or bookseller, or send in a subscription (see page 2).*



## AMERICAN OPINION

A friend sent me a copy of *Reconnoitre Krellig II*. That was a very good story. As you know, we have a pretty good array of science fiction in America, but unfortunately I am afraid that most of it is of a sensational nature,

without any pretensions towards science. So, let me congratulate you on your stated object of trying to produce more thoughtful, better science fiction.

There must be a large public too intelligent to find enjoyment in the pulp stuff mostly offered, who will delight in better works.

Perhaps you will include good, sound science fiction articles in later issues?

**J. V. MERRIN**

**Raleigh, N. Carolina, U.S.A.**

*This letter surprised us. SCIENCE FICTION FORTNIGHTLY must have done some swift travelling to have reached America so quickly. About articles — what do readers think? As stated in our first issue, the book's yours — if a majority want articles as well as a full-length story, you shall have it.*